

THE POLITICS OF TALENT: INEQUALITY, INNOVATION, AND ATTRIBUTION

By

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## Abstract

Since the “Great Recession” in late 2007, economic inequality in the United States has been increasing sharply. The notion of “talent” has been a key prism through which the various responses to economic inequality have been refracted. Talent is able to bend and shape the appearance of economic inequality because it is *rhetorical*, attributing innovation and economic productivity to the “authorship” of specific individuals through *metonymy*. The rhetorical function of talent operates within a broader “neoliberal imaginary,” in which the invisible order of the market appears to operate behind the material world, organizing the environment of concrete, everyday reality. Against the dominant understanding of economic inequality as an issue of the *redistribution* of wealth, I argue a fundamental, prior issue is the *retribution* of *talent*. Framed as a problem of redistribution, economic inequality appears to require the transfer of wealth from productive individuals making disproportionately large economic contributions, to less productive individuals contributing substantially less. I examine the metonymical function of talent through three case studies. In

First, in US immigration reform debates, pro-immigration advocates use the discourse of the “global war for talent,” enabling neoliberal state governance by positing talent as a key ingredient in gaining economic advantage. Second, biographical constructions of Steve Jobs do not quarrel over whether he was talented or a “genius,” but instead take his genius for granted, and concern themselves with specifying the particular sort of genius he manifested. The circulation of Jobs enables the attribution of Apple’s productivity to his possession of “delicate taste,” allowing him to function as a cultural shorthand justifying relations of economic inequality. Third, the response to President Obama’s “you didn’t build that,” speech explicitly argued individual immigrant entrepreneurs were “talented” because they act as the source for

“inventions,” enabling the success of their companies to operate as evidence of talent *ex post facto*, through metonymy. Each case study demonstrates a unique site at which talent is operationalized as a rhetorical mechanism for organizing economic relations of power. While the sites are distinct, however, all three sights illustrate the importance of rhetorical theory to the study and critique of economic inequality.

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## Chapter I:

### **“The Talented Individual”: Inequality and the Economy of Metonymy**

The financial crisis of 2008 had devastating effects for people throughout the United States, forcing millions of Americans into unemployment or foreclosure. In the process, many Americans found their faith in the economy as a vehicle for opportunity badly shaken. This loss of faith was given public form by the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, each of which expressed a strong public belief that the greed of the wealthiest Americans was to blame for the financial collapse. While in many important respects these movements diverged, they both bore witness to intense public concern about rapidly escalating economic inequality in the United States (Judis 2014, June 2). In the process, both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street along with a host of other social movements, agents, and events have helped to drive economic inequality to the forefront of American political consciousness.

Although increases in economic inequality pre-date the “Great Recession,” since 2007-2008 the upward distribution of income gains and wealth has become especially stark. From 2009-2012, 116% of income gains were distributed to the top 10% of income earners, with 95% of these gains distributed to the top 1% (Irwin 2014, September 26). The bottom 90% actually experienced wage *declines*, with nearly 1/6<sup>th</sup> of Americans seeking a full-time job unable to find one post-recession (Irwin 2014, September 26; Stiglitz 2012, p. 1). As Joseph Stiglitz notes, wage and income data tell only a portion of the story, since they fail to represent the falling standard of living for a labor force that is increasingly precarious in the face of economic misfortune (Stiglitz 2012, p. 9-10). For many individuals and families, a missed mortgage payment or unexpected healthcare cost can mean foreclosure and homelessness, producing on-going conditions of economic insecurity that take an immediate, but less easily calculated toll on quality of life



(Stiglitz 2012, p. 14-15). Thus, along with unemployment and falling wages, the Great Recession also ushered in a general state of economic fragility that permeates the everyday lives of many Americans.

The statistical evidence supporting the claim that economic inequality is rising has been accompanied by a growing consensus among both the public and economists. A 2014 Pew poll found that 65% of Americans believe, “the gap between the rich and everyone else has increased over the past decade,” while only 8% believe it is declining (Desilver 2014, April 28). Furthermore, a decisive majority of the public find this trend distressing, with Gallup finding that 67% of Americans are “dissatisfied with the way income and wealth are currently distributed in the U.S.” (Riffkin 2014). This consensus is not restricted to the public but extends also to academic economists as well. As economist Mark Thoma notes, the 2013 publication of Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* propelled economic inequality “to the forefront of economic analysis” (Thoma 2014, May 6). While Piketty’s explanation for rising inequality and his policy recommendations have been the subject of significant controversy, his data illustrating an increasing gap between the haves and have-nots has received near universal praise. As economist Lawrence Summers notes, Piketty proves “absolutely conclusively, that the share of income and wealth going to those at the very top—the top 1 percent, .1 percent, and .01 percent of the population—has risen sharply over the last generation, marking a return to a pattern that prevailed before World War” (Summers 2014). Even an economist skeptical of Piketty such as Greg Mankiw is compelled to note, “the incomes at the top, especially in the top 1 percent, have grown much faster than average,” and that, “these numbers are not easily ignored” (Mankiw 2013, p. 2). Thus, economic inequality has emerged, both in public and lay circles, as a matter of concern in need of ethical response.

“Talent” is a crucial prism through which debates over economic inequality in the US are refracted. Posed in terms of talent, economic inequality appears as an issue of *distribution* of wealth, and the justifiability of state *redistribution* of market-based resource allocation. One influential perspective argues inequality is an effect of globalization. Proponents argue, “the technology-driven economy greatly favors a small group of successful individuals by amplifying their talent and luck, and dramatically increasing their rewards” (Rotman 2014, October 21). If inequality is the byproduct of a shift in market forces that places greater importance upon “talent,” then a widening gap in income distribution may be the relatively unproblematic response of market actors to changing material conditions. Government may have a role to play in re-distributing income in industries like finance in which distortion of markets has disincentivized innovation and effort, but there should be a general presumption against state intervention re-allocate resources.

An alternative perspective argues inequality is driven by wealthy individuals manipulating political institutions to skew market regulation to their advantage. Advocates argue, “we have a political system that gives inordinate power to those at the top, and they have used that power not only to limit the extent of redistribution but also to shape the rules of the game in their favor” (Stiglitz 2012, p. 30). As a result, “the 1 percent are by and large not those who earned their incomes by great social contributions—the great thinkers who have transformed our understanding of the world or the great innovators who have transformed our economy” (Stiglitz 2012, p. 27). If inequality is produced by the capture of the state by the richest 1 percent, then economic inequality involves a massive expropriation of wealth from talented individuals making the greatest economic contributions. Reducing taxes on the wealthy necessary to fund services like public schools is dangerous because it severely limits the

opportunity necessary for talented people to express their abilities. Government redistribution of resources is necessary, therefore, in order to curb the corrosive political influence of the wealthy on the opportunities available for the talented to express their abilities.

Despite the significant differences in the way these positions identify the drivers of inequality, interpret empirical evidence, and the various policy recommendations they propose, they share a fundamental belief in talent as the origin of economic productivity and social contribution. Yet despite relative consensus about the importance of talent, the category is, “frequently left vague and undefined. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes talent” (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 387). On the one hand, whether individuals “possessing talent” are being rewarded for their contributions is a central question in economic inequality debates. On the other, talent itself is an ineffable and elusive concept without clear positive content. The dominant interpretation of this dilemma within US economic inequality discourse has been the assumption that talented individuals are rare and difficult to identify, and that the difficulty in identifying them is simply the byproduct of the singular, ineffable quality of their abilities. By taking talent as a prism for interpreting the economy, debates over inequality restrict politics to the empirical determination of the extent to which talented individuals are being rewarded for their contributions, assessing the desirability of redistribution based upon the answer. Thus, the use of talent as a prism for problematizing economic inequality has framed inequality as an issue of *redistribution*.

The presentation of economic inequality as a problem of redistribution, however, presumes talented individuals to have already been identified since whether they have received rewards commensurate with their contributions is deemed a crucial guide to the appropriateness of government intervention into the market. Talent’s use as a prism through which to view

economic inequality, therefore, carries its own politics of *attribution*, which concerns the distribution of talent itself. Moreover, this politics of attribution is *rhetorical* because talent functions *metonymically*, inserting an ineffable, abstract origin behind concrete, material appearance. Following Michel Foucault, Dave Tell (2010) argues metonymy operates as a technology of power in which the implantation of an abstract figure, such as “the criminal,” enables “an inquiry that looked behind the surface of things in order to discern a personality that could explain and anticipate illegalities” (p. 103-104). By installing an ineffable quality such as the “criminal personality” behind violations of the law, therefore, metonymy bends the perception of particular illegal acts so that they appear to be expressions of a deeper, underlying subjective quality of the individual.

Installing “individual talent” as the transcendental cause for economic innovation enables the output of complex networks of economic innovation, in which laboring bodies, technological infrastructures, commodity extraction and exchange, and consumer goods are entangled together, to be attributed to talented individuals and the extraordinary, endogenous abilities they possess. Talent, therefore, is a rhetorical mechanism for economic governance that enables concrete economic activity to appear to provide ex post facto evidence of originary authorship, attributing the productivity of vast economic assemblages to the extraordinary abilities of a select few. As a result, the function of talent is to bend perception so that a complex network of economic practices appears to converge on a handful of origin points, the “authorship” of “talented individuals.”

In this thesis, I argue against the dominant understanding of economic inequality as a problem of *redistribution of wealth*, positing the *reattribution of talent* as a prior move necessary to reveal the relations of power underpinning economic inequality. Engaging economic

inequality as a problem of *attribution* highlights talent's rhetorical function as a mechanism for unequally assigning authorship through metonymy. In the process, talent serves as a microcosm for a broader "neoliberal imaginary" in which the market itself is understood as an abstract, spontaneous order operating behind the materiality of everyday economic activity (O'Gorman 2016, p. xi). As the third section of this introduction demonstrates, analyzing the relationship between talent and rhetorical theory provides a miniature map of the metonymical operations of power through which neoliberalism itself is constituted.

While talent is ineffable, it operates at specific, concrete sites. In this thesis, I identify three domains in which talent performs political work through metonymy. These are (1) immigration reform debates concerned with attracting the "best and brightest" to the US by calibrating the visa system to selectively admit "talented individuals"; (2) the use of Steve Jobs as a cultural shorthand for "genius," invoked in debates concerning economic inequality, and this shorthand's simultaneous reliance on the trope of "delicate taste" as a means of justifying economic relations of power; (3) President Obama's 2012 "you didn't build that" Roanoke address, and the notion of "the individual" as a particular ontological unit to which talent attributes authorship.

In the remainder of this prospectus, I first trace "talent" as a key analytical category shaping existing debates on economic inequality. Second, I elucidate the rhetorical theory that provides the bulwark for my study, particularly work concerning "metonymy," "the neoliberal imaginary," and "authorship." Finally, I lay out my three proposed case studies in greater detail.

### **Talent and Economic Inequality**

Public policy debates concerning inequality have been highly controversial, and have involved a number of different responses each of which contain distinct assessments of economic

trends, ethical claims, and suggested institutional approaches. This disagreement, however, is articulated through a frame that pre-supposes an “undistorted market,” and the ethical desirability of “just deserts.” These shared assumptions render disagreement merely variation on a theme, with the various positions differentiated across a single axis, talent. In this section, I briefly survey three distinct approaches to economic inequality, exploring both their substantive differences and “talent” as a point of convergence between them. I evaluate the analyses of Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize winning economist and former chief economist of the World Bank, Greg Mankiw, former chairman of George W. Bush’s Council of Economic Advisors, and Lawrence Summers, former Harvard president and Clinton Treasury Secretary. While this survey excludes Marxian and other heterodox approaches, it offers a representative sample of approaches from across the mainstream political spectrum, each of which exercises considerable authority over contemporary economic policy debates. In the process, I show the centrality of talent to understandings of economic inequality, and to highlight the key role rhetorical studies can play in disrupting the shared assumptions of an “undistorted market” and “just deserts” through which talent’s role is articulated.

Stiglitz argues widening wealth and income gaps are the byproduct of the political influence of the wealthy. He posits that the richest Americans influence official institutional channels through campaign finance and lobbying, distorting legal rules to gain an artificially competitive advantage within markets, de-regulating industry to the detriment of consumers and ordinary workers, and influencing tax policy to insulate their wealth from redistribution (Stiglitz 2012, p. xlix-li). This process denies opportunity to middle- and low- income Americans by disproportionately rewarding industries like finance whose actual contributions to growth are minimal, while gutting public expenditures in areas such as education that are crucial to

economic mobility (Stiglitz 2014, p. 2-4). Stiglitz posits economic opportunity and mobility as having both intrinsic ethical importance, and as a crucial component for a functioning democracy and economy, arguing continuation of the status quo will produce reduced growth and economic stability in the long-term (Stiglitz 2014, p. 3-5). On this basis, he argues economic inequality requires stronger financial regulation, improved access to healthcare and education, better laws protecting collective bargaining, and a more progressive tax code (Stiglitz 2014, p. 5).

One element of Stiglitz's argument about the "market distorting" behavior of the wealthy involves opposing rent-seeking elites to "talented individuals." He argues, for example, that the wealthiest individuals are not "the brilliant individuals who made the discoveries without which we would not have had the modern computer" (Stiglitz 2014, p. 2). Similarly, he posits the 1% is not primarily made up of entrepreneurial "job creators," but instead those who have engineered the financial system to their advantage (Stiglitz 2014, p. 2-3). Thus, although Stiglitz is highly suspicious of economic inequality, his criticism of inequality gains much its force from opposing "talented individuals" to financiers and election-engineering elites. This leaves his account of inequality invested in the metonymic figure of the "talented individual" that Summers and Mankiw invoke in their more and less qualified defenses of economic inequality. Rather than criticizing economic inequality in and of itself, Stiglitz's opposition between "talent" and "rent-seeking" leaves him merely objecting to the form that economic inequality has taken, appealing to a vision of an undistorted market outside the legal manipulation of the wealthy.

Lawrence Summers offers a perspective that is more qualified in its concern about economic inequality. Summers argues economic inequality is primarily the byproduct of three trends: executive compensation, financial compensation, and technology and globalization. In the case of executive and financial compensation, Summers suggests there are particular cases of

market failure in which lax regulation and poorly calibrated incentives combine to reward CEOs and financial managers a disproportionate slice of the economic pie relative to their contributions (Summers 2014). However, he argues at least part of increases in compensation for executives and financiers is the result of changes in market forces that value their contributions more highly, rather than bad governance practices allowing them to exploit others (Summers 2014). He suggests the largest driver of inequality is the convergence of technology and globalization, which has de-skilled or eliminated a significant percentage of manufacturing jobs, while producing a market that rewards the most talented entrepreneurs (Summers 2014). He argues, “technology and globalization give greater scope to those with extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, luck, or managerial skill,” producing a recurring situation that is most obvious in cases in which “the best athletes and entertainers benefit from a worldwide market for their celebrity,” but which is increasingly “true for those with extraordinary gifts of any kind” (Summers 2014).

In response, Summers argues bottom-up growth and improved opportunity, rather than “envy,” should be the context for policy solutions, and points to reforms such as stronger antimonopoly laws, improved job training, changes in intellectual property law, improved corporate governance, and infrastructure investment to stimulate job growth (Summers 2014). Summers positions “talented individuals,” as deserving of the fruits of their labor, suggesting politics should focus not on questioning their position of authority, but instead on providing opportunities for those less talented individuals to make a life for themselves. His analysis and Stiglitz’s largely agree regarding the basic analytical terms they use to analyze the economy; they simply disagree empirically about the extent to which inequality is a result of market distortion by the wealthy. While both treat “talented individuals” as deserving the fruits of their labor, Summers treats “talent” as playing a more significant role in explaining economic



inequality than does Stiglitz. As a result, while inequality appears problematic for Summers, the extent to which he finds it to be so is much less than for Stiglitz. In both cases, however, “talent,” and “market distortion,” are the basic prisms through inequality is understood.

N. Gregory Mankiw diverges from Summers and Stiglitz’s in that he treats rising economic inequality as relatively un concerning and even virtuous in its meritocratic distribution of rewards. In responding to Stiglitz’s position, Mankiw agrees inequality should be considered problematic to the extent it emerges from market distortion by wealthy elites (Mankiw 2013, p. 6). However, he empirically disputes Stiglitz’s claims that inequality is driven by market distortion, arguing the evidence that inequality harms economic growth is poor, and that in most cases the compensation of wealthy individuals merely reflects the disproportionate size of their contributions (Mankiw 2013, p. 4-6). Echoing Summers, he argues, “changes in technology have allowed a small number of highly educated and exceptionally talented individuals to command superstar incomes in ways that were not possible a generation ago” (Mankiw 2013, p. 5). Mankiw diverges from Summers, however, in arguing inequality is necessary because it acts as a market signal for motivating the most talented individuals to socially important industries. He argues, “A well-functioning economy needs the correct allocation of talent. The last thing we need is for the next Steve Jobs to forgo Silicon Valley in order to join the high-frequency traders on Wall Street. That is, we shouldn’t be concerned about the next Steve Jobs striking it rich, but we want to make sure he strikes it rich in a socially productive way” (Mankiw 2013, p. 6). Finally, Mankiw argues taxation is unethical outside of very specialized cases, such as eliminating absolute poverty, correcting market distortion, and mitigating externalities (Mankiw 2013, p. 21). This is because taxation coercively confiscates the fruits of one individual’s labor

and transfers it to another individual, in the process violating that individual's private property rights.

While at first blush the perspectives offered by Stiglitz, Summers, and Mankiw differ in their descriptions of the contemporary global economy and in the policy solutions they recommend, these differences are grounded in several fundamental analytic similarities. Each of them uses "talent," and "market distortion," as conceptual tools for assessing economic inequality, and Summers and Mankiw both employ a version of "just desserts" as an ethical argument against re-distribution of income. The notion of "market distortion," is grounded in the assumption that an "undistorted market" exists and provides access to an abstract order that reveals the value of each individual's labor productivity. "Just desserts" arguments posit rewards should be distributed based on the relative contribution provided by each worker within the economy. "Talent" suggests some individuals have a unique internal quality or capacity that makes their labor disproportionately valuable, and thus justifies their receipt of the lion's share of monetary value, in keeping with their special or unique abilities. The differences in perspectives adopted by Stiglitz, Summers, and Mankiw are thus organized along a single continuum of differentiation, namely the degree to which they believe economic inequality is a byproduct of "market distortion."

The result is that much of the contemporary debate concerning economic inequality is largely concerned with assessing empirical evidence concerning "market distortion." In turn, the assessment of this evidence shapes the direction of policymaking, as evidenced by the variety of different proposals offered by Stiglitz, Summers, and Mankiw. If this landscape is taken as a point of departure, the study of rhetoric offers very little to an analysis of economic inequality, limiting itself at best to analysis of the rhetorical strategies used to persuade audiences in

empirical debates regarding inequality. As I show in the next section, however, by problematizing “market distortion,” “talent,” and “just desserts,” rhetorical theory offers both an explanation for how growing economic inequality may be a phenomenon immanent to and produced by these terms of analysis, and provides an alternative analytic for advancing policy conversations regarding inequality.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

A constitutive feature of the neoliberal imaginary is a deep suspicion about the possibility of representing society’s complexity. Key theorists such as Friedrich Hayek, Walter Lippmann, and Milton Friedman drew a distinction between appearance and reality, arguing human representation merely captures a limited “picture” of the complicated mechanisms of individual interaction (O’Gorman 2016, p. 189-190). From this perspective, governance on the basis of political representation is dangerous because attempts to engineer society according to a notion of “common good” or “public interest” treat a particular image of reality as universal (O’Gorman 2016, p. 33-35). In the process, representative governance runs the risk of devolving into fascism as the interests and values of a small number of government policy planners are transformed into “the will of the people” (O’Gorman 2016, p. 28-31). Neoliberal governance is therefore suspicious of democracy, regarding it as a political system prone to crises of legitimacy generated by its attempts to represent the complexity of social process.

Neoliberalism’s suspicion of representation, however, does not involve a wholesale refusal of the concept of reality. Rather, as O’Gorman writes, neoliberalism “challenges the legitimacy of the image as a medium of representation within the broader construction of social order, asserting instead the primacy of an invisible, perhaps even ineffable, economic order” (O’Gorman 2016, p. 40). This invisible economic order operates through *self-interested utility*

*maximization*. Each individual has a particular set of preferences and makes self-interested choices in accordance with those preferences, seeking to maximize their realization (Stigler and Becker 1977, p. 76-77). In the process of maximizing their own interests, however, individuals end up helping one another because they attempt to produce the greatest possible value, which by definition means goods, services, or other activities viewed by others as useful. As O’Gorman (2016) argues, therefore, the neoliberal imaginary coordinates the behavior of self-interested individuals,

not by postulating the equality of persons, but a common measure, the basic monetary unit. Moreover, it looks not to contingent and pragmatic considerations in differentiating roles within the social order but to an inviolable and seemingly providential mechanism, the division of labor, ultimately determined by impersonal market forces. Here, necessity is rooted in a quantifiable, objective logic of scarcity, or supply and demand (p. 192-193)

As Michael Kaplan (2014) notes, markets divide labor and provide information about supply and demand through *prices*, communicative devices used to signal the relative balance of risk and reward involved in a particular choice or action (p. 134-135). From the perspective of rhetorical theory and communication studies, therefore, “mainstream economics’ investment in markets as communications devices is an invitation for communication scholars to address economics on its own terrain” (Kaplan 2014, p. 135). Thus, the neoliberal social imaginary attempts to govern without running afoul of its own iconoclastic critique of democracy by coordinating individuals through a “blind” or “spontaneous” order that exists behind or above the material order of human experience. Given the importance of the iconoclastic critique of the image and theory of markets as communicative devices for coordinating individuals, it is no exaggeration to characterize the neoliberal imaginary as a rhetorical theory of governance and politics.

Talent illustrates yet another rhetorical dimension of the neoliberal imaginary and its market based model of governance. As the introduction to this section argued, the function talent performs is *metonymical*, a trope that Nietzsche defined as “substitution of an abstract cause for concrete appearances” (Tell 2010, p. 99-100). At the level of ontology, metonymy enables the metaphysical separation of being into two distinct orders, one of appearance, and the other of transcendence (Tell 2010, p. 100). Above, the neoliberal imaginary described by O’Gorman is quite clearly metonymical, separating the abstract order of the market from the concrete order of everyday human experience and perspective. The importance of prices is considerable, therefore, since they operate as communicative devices mediating the relationship between the order of the market and the order of the human activity.

One of the functions the price signal is supposed to perform within the neoliberal imaginary is determining the value of individual labor and distributing rewards on the basis of contribution. In theory, their level of “human capital” determines the value of an individual’s labor. As Foucault (2008) argues, “the wage is nothing other than the remuneration, the income allocated to a certain capital, a capital that we will call human capital inasmuch as the ability-machine of which it is the income cannot be separated from the human individual who is its bearer” (p. 226). Human capital, however, introduces a second-order problem: the mechanism for discovering the level of human capital a particular individual possesses. Catherine L. Fisk (2006) argues, “attribution” is essential to distributing credit in intellectual production. In the attribution process, “credit becomes a form of human capital itself because it translates and signals the existence of a deeper layer of human capital” (p. 54). In an increasingly informationalized economy, “we increasingly value attribution because labor mobility and the decline of personal relationships have limited access to other sources of information about

employees,” and thus attribution plays a crucial role in determining the perception of capacity and ability (Fisk 2006, p. 55). Determinations about the relative level of individual labor contribution, therefore, involve a complex politics of attribution in which *authorship* is distributed through *perception*.

In the neoliberal imaginary, talent plays a crucial role in structuring the attribution of authorship through *metonymy*, positing an ineffable, transcendent capacity endogenous to particular individuals. Operating as a microcosm for the neoliberal imaginary itself, the labor capacity of individuals also resides in an abstract realm metonymically separated from the realm of human activity. Here, the talent-function appears homologous to “authorship.” As Foucault (1977) argues, the “author-function,”

is not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual. It results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author. Undoubtedly, this construction is assigned a ‘realistic’ dimension as we speak of an individual’s ‘profundity’ or ‘creative’ power, his [sic] intentions or the original inspiration manifested in writing. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projects, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice (p. 127).

For a neoliberal imaginary, “talent,” performs the role Foucault designates for the “author-function,” operating as a “project for handling labor.” Indeed, the Enlightenment concept of “authorship” was a means of “handling labor” by enabling writers to secure intellectual property. As Martha Woodensee (1994) notes, during the early Enlightenment writers, “sought to earn

their livelihood from the sale of their writings to the new and rapidly expanding reading public,” but lacked the protection of copyright laws (p. 36). Continuing, she argues,

In response to this problem, and in an effort to establish the economic viability of living by the pen, these writers set about redefining the nature of writing. Their reflections on this subject played a critical role in shaping the modern concept of authorship its modern form (p. 36).

During the Enlightenment, therefore, the meaning of authorship underwent a radical shift in which the individual author was identified as the source of inspiration. Woodensee contends Enlightenment theorists of authorship,

minimized the element of craftsmanship (in some instances they simply discarded it) in favor of the element of inspiration, and they internalized the source of that inspiration. That is, the inspiration for a work came to be regarded as emanating not from outside or above, but from within the writer himself. ‘Inspiration’ came to be explicated in terms of original genius, with the consequence that the inspired work was made peculiarly and distinctively the product and the property of the writer (p. 37).

In a neoliberal imaginary, therefore, talent is a prism that functions metonymically, bending and refracting the perceptual operation of attribution towards the abstract figure of the “author,” the source of ineffable creativity and inspiration from which labor flows. As a result, talent enables material goods and concrete services to appear as the byproduct of the unique, transcendental capacities of individuals. In turn, the operation of metonymy purports to avoid the faulty realm of human perception altogether, locating human capital in the ineffable order of talent, itself a miniaturized model of the neoliberal imaginary.

The operation of talent, therefore, performs a crucial political function because it structures the attribution of authorship that subsequently patterns the distribution of wealth and income. The politics of talent, therefore, have high stakes for economic inequality and relations of power more broadly. As Brown and Tannock (2009) note,

A central paradox of the rising concern over a global war for talent is that ‘talent’ is frequently left vague and undefined. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes talent. Business elites claim that ‘a certain part of talent eludes description: You simply know it when you see it’ (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, and Axelrod 2001, xii). Whatever truth there might be to such a statement, it also gives corporate employers an awful lot of leeway to make self-interested and unfair recruitment and promotion decisions, and provides a dubious basis on which to build a whole raft of sweeping reforms (p. 387).

Talent’s relationship to economic inequality, however, is not merely limited to the everyday micropolitics of corporate labor. Instead, talent has played a crucial role in structuring a regime of global governance calibrated to the neoliberal imaginary. Aihwa Ong (2006) argues, “We are beginning to see a detachment of entitlements from political membership and national territory, as certain rights and benefits are distributed to bearers of marketable talents and denied to those who are judged to lack such capacity or potential” (p. 16). Talent even inflects practices of popular struggle and resistance, muting outrage at economic inequality by presenting some wealthy individuals as heroes possessing an ineffable sort of genius. Michael Kazin (2015, February 17) summarizes this perspective, positing,

In a provocative new book, the critic and historian Steve Fraser tries to explain why mass protest on the left has become so scarce in what he aptly calls *The Age of Acquiescence*. For Fraser, the main culprits are not such usual suspects as right-wing politicians and the



market power of global corporations but public admiration for workaholic entrepreneurs whose self-serving definition of freedom legitimizes their reign. Fraser blames the pervasive image of leading businessmen as “populist heroes” for quelling mass outrage about how corporations rule both workplaces and politics. It’s difficult to malign a mogul like Steve Jobs, a wonky “striver from the middling classes” who invented such lovely, addictive gadgets.

The politics of talent, therefore, carry significant stakes for both economic inequality, and relations of power more broadly.

As this section has demonstrated, talent functions as a crucial prism for determining the value of individual labor within a broader neoliberal imaginary. The metonymical procedure performed by this prism is crucial because it refracts and bends the perception of labor, supposedly mediating the faulty realm of human perception by tapping into the ineffable, transcendental order of talent. If labor and economic inequality are refracted through talent, therefore, the everyday world of material labor and consumer goods appears as to be authored by “talented individuals” possessing extraordinary, even transcendental abilities. In the process rhetorical operationalization of talent as metonymy provides a miniaturized schema of the politics of the neoliberal imaginary itself, enabling the rhetorical study of talent’s operation at small scale to provide insight into much systems of governance. In the next section, I lay out my three case studies, each of which represents a distinct site at which the politics of talent are made visible.

## Case Studies

This section previews the three case studies addressed in this chapter: immigration reform debates over high-skilled visas, biographical constructions of Steve Jobs, and Obama's 2012 Roanoke address and N. Gregory Mankiw's response to the address. Each of these cases represents a distinct site at which discourses of talent emerge, in the first case in a legislative debate, in the second in the popular culture construction of a well-known entrepreneur, and in the third a presidential campaign. While the sites are each distinct, I aim to show that the discourses of talent that emerge in each are complementary and have shared formal characteristics. In each case, "talent" functions as mechanism for attributing authorship through metonymy, while hiding from view the power politics required to become salient as "talented" in the first place. In US immigration reform debates, pro-immigration advocates use the discourse of the "global war for talent," enabling neoliberal state governance by positing talent as a key ingredient in gaining economic advantage. Biographical constructions of Steve Jobs do not quarrel over whether he was talented or a "genius," but instead take his genius for granted, and concern themselves with specifying the particular sort of genius he manifested. The circulation of Jobs attributes Apple's productivity to his possession of "delicate taste," allowing his genius, a special sort of talent, to function as a cultural shorthand justifying relations of economic inequality. Finally, the response to President Obama's "you didn't build that," speech explicitly argued individual entrepreneurs were "talented" because they act as the source for "inventions," playing upon the pre-existing circulation of specific wealthy Americans as talented to enable attribution of authorship to the wealthy to appear plausible. Thus, each case study shows a unique but formally similar instance in which talent is invoked as a taken-for-granted concept in order to justify or constitute relations of economic inequality.

### *Immigration Reform*

The recent debate over comprehensive immigration reform has been a subject of intense controversy. An eye in this storm, however, has been increasing visas for “high-skilled immigrants,” which has won the approval of business lobbies and leaders from both major political parties (Ali 2011, May 10). This consensus is interesting because immigration reform is a clear case in which the nation explicitly imagines the structure of the global political economy. The immigration reform debate concerns *potential* immigrants not yet in the United States, and tends to turn on the argument that these immigrants are deserving of inclusion, which itself is a determination increasingly made on economic grounds (Gerken 2013, p. 235). In debating whether immigrants are worthy of admission or not, public policy discourse imagines the ideal composition of the economy, and emphasizes an image of the “good immigrant” that provides clues as to the dominant fashion in which the US economy is understood. Thus, investigating the documented immigration portion of immigration debates offers a key moment of insight into the discursive frame by which key institutional agents such as high-tech businesses and politicians understand the US economy.

The consensus surrounding the need for an increased quantity of “high-skilled immigrants,” has been motivated by a sense that, as popular *New York Times* columnist David Brooks put it, “most nations are competing to win the global talent race,” and the “United States is losing this competition” because of its arcane immigration system (Brooks 2013, January 31). Repeatedly, high-skilled immigrants are referred to as “the best and the brightest,” and “the world’s future innovators and entrepreneurs,” providing justifications for their inclusion based on discourses that use “talent” to build a conception of the “good immigrant” (Obama 2011, May

10; Schumer et al. 2013, January 28). Moreover, these discourses imagine the US to be competing with other nations in a race for a limited supply of talent, as Brooks's quote illustrates. In the process, "war for talent" discourses simultaneously treat talent as a good in perpetually limited supply, and a product of educational achievement that can be measured by academic credentials (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 387-388).

In this chapter, I examine a variety of key pro-immigration texts in the public policy debate over comprehensive immigration reform, including think tank reports, public addresses, and major newspaper editorials. I analyze these texts using Robert Asen's (2010) notion of public policy discourse as multiply authored, temporally distributed, and polysemic (Asen 2010, p. 132-137). In the process, I argue these texts illustrate the profound influence of "war for talent" discourse upon contemporary understandings of the global economy. By mobilizing "competition" as a technology of governance, this discourse renders "attracting talent" an imperative of state governance. In the process, "talent" is made visible through the creation of a "selective migration regime," enabling a "war for talent" precisely by working to configure the borders of the nation-state as though one is already underway.

### *Steve Jobs*

Steve Jobs is of the most recognizable figures in the United States—if not by face, certainly through his association with technology giant Apple. Tremendous cultural resources have been exerted attempting to understand Jobs, including Walter Isaacson's best selling official biography, *Steve Jobs*. Through Isaacson's biography, Jobs's "life story has emerged as an odd sort of holy scripture for entrepreneurs—a gospel and an antigospel at the same time," in which he becomes "a Rorschach test, a screen onto which entrepreneurs and executives can project a justification of their own lives" (Austen 2012, August 23). Regardless of whether Jobs

is viewed as social model or villain, however, his “genius” has remained an unquestioned premise. Instead, Isaacson’s biography and the responses it inspired have focused their attention on the *particularity* of Jobs’s genius, attempting to specify the qualities that distinguished him from other great minds. For example, Isaacson compares him to Bill Gates, positing,

Gates was good at computer coding, unlike Jobs, and his mind was more practical, disciplined, and abundant in analytic processing power. Jobs was more intuitive and romantic and had a greater instinct for making technology usable, design delightful, and interfaces friendly (Isaacson 2011, p. 171).

This practice of *specifying* Jobs’s genius works by virtue of metonymy, presupposing the existence of “the talented individual,” and Jobs’s status as such a figure, and then grafting genius upon him. Genius is grafted onto Jobs through two key technologies: the description of his genius as “delicate taste,” and the operation of metonymy enabling Jobs to appear to be the abstract origin of Apple’s products, allowing Apple itself to serve as evidence of his “creative genius.” In the first case, “talent” and “taste,” operate as equivalent concepts, each gaining its meaning only through the assumption it exists, and subsequent technologies of government mobilized to enable its attribution to particular individuals. In the second, Jobs’s circulation as a genius operates metonymically, positing the materiality of Apple’s touch screens and minimalist aesthetic as effects of his genius.

While on its face disconnected from questions of economic inequality, Jobs’s function as cultural short hand has proven an immensely popular resource for rendering “talent” coherent as an explanation for economic inequality. As Larry Summers writes, for example,

there is the basic truth that technology and globalization give greater scope to those with extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, luck, or managerial skill. Think about the contrast

between George Eastman, who pioneered fundamental innovations in photography, and Steve Jobs. Jobs had an immediate global market, and the immediate capacity to implement his innovations at very low cost, so he was able to capture a far larger share of their value than Eastman. Correspondingly, while Eastman's innovations and their dissemination through the Eastman Kodak Co. provided a foundation for a prosperous middle class in Rochester for generations, no comparable impact has been created by Jobs's innovations (Summers 2014).

In this chapter, I examine popular media circulation of Jobs in mediums such as biography and mainstream newspaper editorials. I interpret these popular media by excavating "taste" emerging from within the Enlightenment rhetorical tradition. I argue that grafting "talent" onto Jobs makes him available as material evidence of "the talented individual," allowing him to operate as a crucial evidence of the growing importance of talent to competitive success in the global economy.

*"You Didn't Build That"*

On July 13, 2012, President Barack Obama, locked in a tight race against challenger Mitt Romney, took the stage at a fire station in Roanoke, Virginia. Echoing a speech by Massachusetts Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren earlier that year, the president argued,

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business – *you didn't build that*. Somebody else made that happen (emphasis added; Obama 2012, July 13).

Overnight, “you didn’t build that” became a key meme used by the Romney campaign to stir entrepreneurial indignation; an entire day of the 2012 RNC was even dedicated to the theme “We Built This!” explicitly positioning Republicans against Obama’s message (Barrett 2012, August 21). Republicans across the country played clips of the speech, staking their political futures on the certainty of public backlash to the president’s words (Barrett 2012, August 21). The President himself was forced to walk back his own statement, arguing somewhat weakly, although not inaccurately, that his message had been taken out of context (O’Brien 2012, July 24). Thus, while the Romney and Obama campaigns disagreed fiercely about the meaning of “you didn’t build that” they generally agreed that “the individual” is the basic ontological unit of the economy. This point of agreement has significant stakes for the broader debate over economic inequality because it figures entrepreneurial “talent” as the source of the innovation driving economic growth. While the president’s speech certainly argued against the negative effects of economic inequality, his agreement that talented entrepreneurs are the source of “invention,” produces a dangerous first premise for arguments in defense of economic inequality.

In this chapter, I examine conservative backlash to President Obama’s Roanoke address, highlighting Romney economic advisor N. Gregory Mankiw’s “Defending the One Percent,” as the intellectual culmination of the conservative response. I argue Mankiw uses Obama’s agreement “talented individuals” are sources of invention in order to build a justification for economic inequality. I argue, however, that Mankiw’s argument leaves the source of “invention,” “talent,” undefined and incoherent within his account, instead relying on invention as evidence of talent, and talent as justification for attributing invention to a single individual.

In response to Mankiw, I use Thomas Rickert’s (2013) theory of “ambient rhetoric,” and Peter Simonson’s (2014) notion of invention as “embodied, interaction, emergent, and shaped by

inequalities of power” (Simonson 2014, p. 317) to posit an alternative hermeneutic for attribution of labor and credit beside talent. I argue a more radical reading of Obama’s Roanoke Address points towards the difficulty inherent to determining “who did what,” suggesting this difficulty as a basis for engaging economic inequality as a *rhetorical* problem.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis suggests important implications for understanding political economy in the United States in an age of accelerating economic inequality. In investigating economic inequality, I am not merely interested in suggesting the value of policies aimed at rectifying a gap in resource distribution. Instead, I want to shed light on an *ontological* inequality that “talent” purports to describe between a small segment of society, which is productive, creative, and inventive, and the mass of society, which is unproductive, rote, and predictable. In the process, therefore, I hope to illustrate the key role played rhetoric in general, and metonymy in particular, in enabling the massively unequal attribution of authorship to a select few individuals.



## Chapter II:

### Immigration, Competitiveness and “The Global War for Talent”: The Neoliberal Politics of Attribution

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011, President Obama delivered a speech in El Paso, Texas outlining his blueprint for immigration reform (Paulson 2011, May 10). He introduced four principles he hoped would guide the legislative discussion (Obama 2011, May 10). First, that “government has a threshold responsibility to secure our borders and enforce the law.” Second, that “businesses have to be held accountable if they exploit undocumented workers.” Third, that those here “illegally” must complete a series of steps including paying fines and learning English to apply to “legally” immigrate. Fourth, that the visa system should be reformed making it “easier for the best and brightest to not only stay here, but also to start businesses and create jobs here.”

The reception of the president’s speech by politicians, pundits, academics, and other interlocutors illustrated stark disagreement regarding comprehensive immigration reform (Mason 2011, May 10). The controversy, however, was largely limited to the first three principles outlined in the president’s speech, each of which concerned *undocumented* immigration. By contrast, the president’s call to attract the “best and brightest” through increased visa distribution for *documented* immigrants was received with near universal praise and assent (Ali 2011, May 10). Given vehement disagreement on nearly all other contemporary US immigration issues, the generally contentious history of immigration reform debates, and the complex symbolic position immigrants occupy vis-à-vis American national identity, the ease with which consensus was reached on the importance of the “best and the brightest” immigrants appears as a significant and puzzling aberration.

The consensus regarding the importance of admitting “talented” immigrants reflects the influence of neoliberalism as a prism, as outlined in the introduction. This neoliberal imaginary makes the US immigration system appear within conditions of “international competitiveness,” in which states must govern themselves as firms seeking to maximize their attractiveness to gain economic advantage over other states in the international system (Fougner 2006, p. 178-179). In the context of immigration, “competitiveness” takes the form of a “global war for talent,” in which attracting a scarce supply of talented workers operates as the primary imperative of the visa system (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 79). The discourse of advocates for expanded US visa distribution, therefore, offers a window into the function and politics of talent since the immigration system is situated as a key site for the attraction of talent.

In this chapter, I argue the politics of talent function metonymically, attributing authorship for innovation and economic growth to immigrant high-tech founders presumed to possess extraordinary abilities. Read through the prism of talent, the success of these founders’ companies is interpreted as *ex post facto* evidence of their exceptionality. In the process, talent operates symbiotically with the discourse of the “knowledge economy,” which argues economic growth is driven by intellectual production. As it attributes economic growth to a select group of individuals, the politics of talent present technological innovation as the byproduct of “big ideas” and “moments of inspiration,” obscuring a complex set of collaborative practices and intellectual networks. Critically engaging the politics of talent is crucial because its metonymical function enables an intensifying, unequal competition between nations in order to secure individuals capable of driving technological innovation and economic growth. Ultimately, this competition produces a “global war for talent” in which countries compete with one another to offer

preferential status to individuals deemed talented, while simultaneously producing a massive global underclass.

In what follows, I first outline immigration reform as a useful context for exploring “economic imaginaries,” emphasizing the increasingly economic terms in which the US visa system is understood. Second, I describe “international competitiveness” as a mechanism for disciplining state governance, enjoining states to govern themselves as firms competing for economic advantage through strategies of attraction of “talented” immigrants. To do so, I examine the “global war for talent” as a specific manifestation of competitiveness in the context of immigration reform, illustrating the central position afforded talent within this economic imaginary. Third, I examine the politics of talent and its metonymical function as they manifest themselves in the discourse of US immigration reform advocates, synthesizing a variety of texts produced between 2009-2013. Finally, I examine the implications of talent’s metonymical function in the context of the “global war for talent” and neoliberal competitiveness, arguing “talent” attributes innovations to the authorship of individuals by installing abstract, transcendental capacity behind concrete economic practices.

### **Immigration, Globalization, and Economic Imaginaries**

US immigration policy debates offer a fruitful avenue for exploring economic discourse in general, and the politics of “talent” in particular. Immigration is a key nexus point at which states direct global population flows, using tools like the visa regime to manage the composition of their populations. As Mark B. Salter (2006) contends, for example,

[T]he management of international populations is conditioned presently by nationality/statelessness, labor/leisure, health/disease, and normalcy/ risk. The loose

structure of the global visa regime represents an important aspect of this international control of bodies or control of international bodies (p. 177)

US public policy debates over visa caps and selection criteria, therefore, represent particular moments in which the ideal composition of the US population is directly at issue.

Increasingly, these debates have engaged and interpreted immigration as an economic problem. J. David Cisneros (2014) argues that in President Obama's immigration discourse, for example, "Good immigrants embody the spirit of entrepreneurialism and economic innovation (as evidenced in Obama's many stories), while bad immigrants depress the economy" (p. 90). The assessment of immigrants in economic terms derives in part from immigration debates from the late 1980s through the mid 1990s. During these debates, "politicians and the mainstream media successfully constructed an alarmist image that maintains that large-scale immigration has had a detrimental impact on the U.S. economy" (Gerken 2013, p. 250). As a result of this presumption, the burden of proof rests with pro-immigration advocates and current and prospective US immigrants to prove expanded immigration will not harm the economy.

As Cisneros highlights above, President Obama and many other backers of expanding US immigration have responded by presenting their proposed immigration system as only increasing the flow of "good" immigrants. Since this strategy implicitly accepts the presumption that immigrants are generally an economic drain, its use has "confirmed and maybe even strengthened the neoliberal agenda" of tying selection criteria to economic calculation (Gerken 2013, p. 245). In US policy debates, expanded immigrant supporters have attempted to use "level of education and marketable job skills" as a means of drawing "a sharp distinction between skilled and unskilled immigrants," and thus distinguishing "good" and "bad" immigrants (Gerken 2013, p. 5). For example, the Gang of Eight Senators' 2013 bipartisan immigration

proposal awarded, “a green card to immigrants who have received a PhD or Master's degree in science, technology, engineering, or math from an American university” (Schumer et al. 2013, January 28). Negotiating the economic utility of the particular immigrants to be admitted into the US, therefore, is a central and defining characteristic of contemporary US immigration policy debates.

The process of differentiating between good, “high-skilled” immigrants and bad, low-skilled immigrants does not involve absolute calculations of utility. Indeed, understanding immigrants as disembodied containers for a “bundle of technical skills that are fed into the economy” is counterproductive because it “inhibits our understanding of skill formation and the social relations of productivity growth in post-industrial societies” (Brown, Green, and Lauder 2001, p. 13-16). Immigrants appear “high-skilled” only in the context of a particular “imagined economy” in which those skills appear essential to US economic productivity. This is not to dismiss economics or assessments of skill as “mere social constructions” or “simply expressions of ideology” entirely divorced from materiality. Instead, recognizing “high-skills” as embedded within a particular imagined economy highlights the material, historical, and embodied quality of high-skilled discourse, and emphasizes the sense in which discourse and materiality cannot be cleanly separated into distinct, autonomous realms. US immigration policy debates, therefore, do not simply negotiate competing policy proposals, but also involve the location of those policy proposals within particular economic imaginaries in which the remedies they offer appear plausible.

Robert Asen (2010) outlines a useful methodology for the rhetorical study of public policy debates such as those concerning the US immigration system. He argues public policies are a “mediation of rhetorical and material forces,” in which those policies materially “provide

money, goods, and services to target populations to achieve particular outcomes,” while the rhetorical dimension of public policy works to “create, sustain, negotiate, and redefine the meanings of the very money, goods, and services provided” (Asen 2010, p. 126). Advocates arguing for increased US visa distribution, for example, seek a material change in the government’s regulation of global flows of mobility through greater provision of a particular good, visa documentation, to a target population of immigrants. Discursive formations such as the economic imaginaries within which pro-immigration backers articulate their policy reforms operate, “relatively independently of individual participants,” and are “collective achievements,” which emerge over the course of the policy debate (Asen 2010, p. 133). Asen argues rhetorical criticism seeking insight into the discourses driving public policy should combine an analysis of macro and micro scales. He contends,

At the macro level, the statements of individuals may be mixed and matched to reconstruct larger themes. Discourse appears as the rhetor, and situation refers to the larger political, economic, and social forces informing policy debate. At the micro level, particular exchanges obtain significance for both their representativeness and their exceptionalism (Asen 2010, p. 134).

By examining the texts produced by various interlocutors in US immigration policy debates, therefore, rhetorical critics can map the prisms through which particular immigration policy proposals gain plausibility. In turn, immigration provides a particular, situated context in which the politics of these economic imaginaries are revealed, illustrating the relations of power produced by their means of problematizing governance.

In the next section, I argue pro-immigration advocates interpret the existing US immigration system through a neoliberal imaginary, in which states are embedded in conditions

of international competitiveness and must govern themselves as entrepreneurial firms seeking to maximize their attractiveness in order to gain economic advantage. This neoliberal imaginary situates the existing US immigration system within a global war for talent, in which international competitiveness is specifically directed towards attracting a scarce supply of talented workers. In the process, therefore, pro-immigration proponents reveal a politics of talent, in which talent becomes a crucial problematic for US economic governance and immigration reform.

### **Competitiveness, the Knowledge Economy, and The Global War for Talent**

In the introduction, I described neoliberalism as a “social imaginary” suspicious of the capacity of human perception and discourse to capture the complexity of society. This entrepreneurial political rationality is not, however, confined to individual human beings. Illana Gershon (2011) argues neoliberalism “misrecognizes scale,” through its insistence that,

all agents are fashioned as autonomous rational calculators, with size and functional ability the primary factors for creating distinctions. So individual people are simply smaller versions of corporations, communities are interchangeable with small businesses—in this sense neoliberal agency is fractal. At all levels, the units and their interactions are supposedly organized and intertwined in the same way (p. 541).

As a political rationality, therefore, a neoliberal imaginary situates states as entrepreneurial agents seeking to maximize their position within a globalized market. For neoliberal governmentality, situating nation-states within a global market is particularly important because of its constitutive suspicion of representative governance and state planning.

Competitiveness operates as the key mechanism for achieving this behavioral shift, with nation-states operating as competition states, in an environment of international competitiveness. From the perspective of neoliberalism, international competitiveness is produced by

“(re)locational freedom on the part of capital,” in which investors have the global mobility to move their money, and correspondingly other assets, virtually anywhere (Fougner 2006, p. 177). Moreover, the mobility of global capital itself is brought on by the circular movement neoliberalism, in which the perception that financial deregulation is necessary for states to compete in the global market makes global capital mobile in the first place (Cameron and Palan 2004, p. 154). As a result, capital mobility renders the state, “a competitor and entrepreneur operating in a global ‘market for investment,’” forced to differentiate itself from other states as a desirable location for investment (Fougner 2006, p. 180). Christopher Browning (2015) notes, “the ‘competition state’ has transformed from a narrow focus on assisting national firms to an emphasis on making the state itself an increasingly attractive destination for global investment capital” (p. 203). State governance therefore shifts from attempting to secure full employment toward management of the nation’s “attractiveness” through branding. This shift is, “part of what might be described as a broader ‘attention economy,’ where success becomes dependent on being noticed through attracting and holding the attention of relevant audiences/consumers” (Browning 2015, p. 203). In the emerging conditions of international competitiveness, national governments “can seemingly not do much else but either discipline themselves in relation to, or forcefully be disciplined by, the ‘global logic’ of so-called market forces” (Fougner 2006, p. 179). Neoliberal governmentality, therefore, operates as a global political rationality conditioned by capital mobility, itself a byproduct of neoliberal governance, in which states conceive themselves as risk-managing enterprises competing to render themselves most attractive to potential investors. The resulting transformation in governmental conditions leaves state officials forced to make economic policy according to the expectations of globally mobile financial capital.



The bulk of the literature on the competition state primarily focuses on capital mobility as a condition driving international competitiveness and global neoliberal governance. An emerging critique of competitiveness, however, analyzes labor mobility as a vehicle for neoliberal globalization, arguing nation-states, municipalities, and corporations have become embroiled in a “global war for talent.” Philip Brown and Stuart Tannock (2009) summarize the basic structure of this discourse as a claim that, “intense economic competition has sparked a ‘war for talent’, accelerating the evolutionary path towards meritocratic societies, as companies and governments seek to exploit the talents of the ‘brightest’ and the ‘best’” (p. 377). In accordance with neoliberal governmentality’s leveling of scale, this discourse blurs the distinction between corporations and nation-states, merging corporate consulting and national policy recommendations. The corporate literature treats the performance of a select few exceptional workers as crucial to success in the market, a byproduct of increasingly global employee recruitment practices and the shift to a “knowledge economy” (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 379-380). “Global war for talent” discourse operates similarly in a national policy context, with advocates arguing the scarcity of talented individuals has disciplined these immigrants into global mobility, forcing nations to compete with one another to attract these workers and the high-wage jobs they supposedly bring with them (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 381). As with national policymakers attempts to attract capital investment, the mobility of talent and global competition to attract it produces a situation in which, “political elites around the world argue that they have no choice but to enter into the global war for talent” (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 381). As a result, then, “global war for talent” discourse is the labor mobility equivalent of the “attraction economy” that governs capital investment, necessitating states manage themselves as entrepreneurial agents in conditions of global neoliberal competition.

In the case of immigration reform, pro-immigration advocates problematize existing US visa policy in terms of its ability to “attract talent,” reflecting the “global war for talent” and the neoliberal imaginary in which it is embedded. President Obama (2011, May 10) argues,

Today, we provide students from around the world with visas to get engineering and computer science degrees at our top universities. But then our laws discourage them from using those skills to start a business or a new industry here in the United States. Instead of training entrepreneurs to stay here, we train them to create jobs for our competition.

That makes no sense. In a global marketplace, we need all the talent we can attract, all the talent we can get to stay here to start businesses.

Obama’s indictment of the immigration system operates within the neoliberal imaginary, in which securing talent is crucial for states embedded within international competitiveness. For Obama, therefore, existing US visa policy appears problematic because its policies fail to reflect the mobility of talent and the imperative to attraction talent’s mobility imposes on nation-states. As, J. David Cisneros (2014) argues,

According to Obama’s approach to immigration, the neoliberal logic extends most directly into the moral judgment of good and bad immigrants, who are best understood as economic units. Immigrants can either contribute to the competitiveness of the United States in the global free market, or they weigh down American industry through low-wage labor (p. 90).

The Gang of Eight senators make a similar move in their proposal for a bipartisan framework for immigration reform, contending, “Our failure to act is perpetuating a broken system which sadly discourages the world's best and brightest citizens from coming to the United States” (Schumer et al. 2013, January 28). The Gang of Eight argues visa policy should “recognize the

importance of characteristics that will help build the American economy,” (Schumer et al. 2013, January 28) namely the importance of talent within conditions of international competitiveness. For proponents of expanded US visa distribution, therefore, successful immigration reform requires a prior acknowledgement of the “global war for talent,” and the neoliberal imaginary in which it is embedded.

In the process, this problematic narrowly circumscribes the agency of policymakers, requiring the US immigration system mimic the competitive strategies of other states in order to avoid falling behind. For example, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks contends, “most nations are competing to win the global talent race,” arguing the relatively low percentage of visas the US earmarks for high-skilled workers means the nation “is losing this competition” to nations like Canada (Brooks 2013, January 31). John Feinblatt, former chief policy advisor for Michael Bloomberg and chairman of the pro-immigration business coalition, Partnership for a New American Economy, chastises the immigration system for giving “just 7% of our permanent residency ‘green cards’ to fill gaps in our economy,” while “Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom allocate around 60% of all permanent visas this way” (Feinblatt 2013, January 30). The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) cites countries such as Japan, Australia, and New Zealand ability to attract talented immigrants, arguing, “The United States is now facing a global competition for talent, and though it holds many advantages, it is no longer the only choice for the most talented immigrants seeking advancement” (Alden 2009, p. 16). As the discourse of pro-immigration reform advocates illustrates, the “global war for talent” not only renders attracting talent a necessary imperative of state governance, but also directs those attraction strategies towards an optimal point of convergence in which each nation’s immigration system becomes functionally equivalent.

International competitiveness and the neoliberal imaginary in which it is embedded problematize state policies such as visa distribution in terms of a global war for talent, rendering attracting talent a crucial imperative of governance. As they describe the importance of attracting talent and securing victory in the global war for talent, advocates of greater levels of US immigration outline a “knowledge economy” theory of economic growth and production. In the knowledge economy, economic growth and production are driven by technological innovation. In turn, these technological innovations are the byproduct of the unique ideas, creative processes, and abilities of the talented. Situated within the knowledge economy, talent operates metonymically, enabling innovations to be read as both byproducts of the authorship of talented individuals, and as ex post facto evidence of talent in the first place. This metonymical function produces a politics of talent, in which the attribution of innovation to a small number of individuals enables relations of power and economic inequality to appear not only as a byproduct of the distribution of talent, but also as necessary conditions for maintaining economic advantage within the “global war for talent.”

### **The Talented Immigrant**

Knowledge economy discourse imagines a global political economy in the process of structural transition away from production driven by industrialized manufacturing, and towards an economy in which growth is the byproduct of *intellectual production*. Philip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton (2011) summarize this discourse, contending,

“Leading companies no longer depended on the mass production of standardized goods and services that are made, monitored, distributed, and sold by vast armies of blue-collar and white-collar employees. Rather, they depended on technological innovation, applied knowledge, and the intellectual capital of a highly skilled workforce” (p. 19).

Discourse about the knowledge economy posits this structural transition as a byproduct of increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence and production technologies that have de-skilled or permanently eliminated the need for a large quantity of blue-collar and white-collar labor (Rotman 2015). At the same time, the ubiquity of complex technological systems renders innovations enhancing the productivity of technology the crucial mechanism driving economic growth. This creates a demand for talent, which provides the intellectual labor on which innovation relies.

The apparent importance of talent to economic growth, and subsequently of attracting talent to state governance, is the byproduct of its metonymical function. Situating talent within a knowledge economy enables the attribution of innovations to individuals already perceived to possess ineffable capabilities, allowing their public visibility to function as *ex post facto* evidence of their talent. In turn, the attribution of innovation to talented individuals serves to legitimize knowledge economy discourse, providing concrete representative cases that appear to confirm the claim talent primarily drives innovation and economic growth. The interrelationship between knowledge economy discourse and the metonymical function of talent operate hand-in-hand with a neoliberal imaginary because they provide an underlying justification for the imperative to attract talent.

A revealing example of talent's metonymical function is the attribution of publicly salient high-tech companies to their immigrant founders. In his El Paso address, President Obama argues,

In a global marketplace, we need all the talent we can attract, all the talent we can get to stay here to start businesses – not just to benefit those individuals, but because their contribution will benefit all Americans. Look at Intel, look at Google, look at Yahoo,

look at eBay. All those great American companies, all the jobs they've created, everything that has helped us take leadership in the high-tech industry, every one of those was founded by, guess who, an immigrant (Obama 2011, May 10).

In Obama's discourse, the pre-existing salience of Yahoo, Google, Intel, and Instagram as markers of economic productivity plays a key role in the metonymic functioning of talent. In attributing the productivity of Google, Yahoo, and eBay to their founders, Obama renders these companies byproducts of individuals, while arguing the talent of these founders accounts for the productivity of their companies. In the process, Obama simultaneously attributes talent to individual authorship by assigning it to the three companies' founders, and interprets talent as the *abstract cause* for the companies themselves. The politics by which Obama attributes the success of Google, Yahoo, and eBay to their founders disappears, therefore, appearing merely as the recognition of talent that the founders already possessed.

Obama's El Paso speech also demonstrates the important role talent's metonymical function plays in enabling the neoliberal imperative to attract talent. Obama problematizes state governance in terms of a neoliberal imaginary, situating the existing US immigration system in the context of a global marketplace. In the next sentence of the speech, Obama positions this global marketplace as beset by conditions of international competitiveness, arguing "we don't want the next Intel or the next Google to be created in China or India" (Obama 2011, May 10). Winning the global war for talent only appears imperative by virtue of metonymy, specifically Obama's attribution of the productivity and innovativeness of Intel and Google to the talent of their immigrant founders. Moreover, his description of these companies as the crucial drivers of job creation reveals the extent to which the metonymical function of talent is capable of allowing

a handful of high-tech founders to appear to be the hinge point on which US economic well-being rests.

Another variation on this theme is attributing successful companies to a “big idea,” generated by a talented founder. In a 2013 speech in Las Vegas, Obama contends the US should become a “magnet for the best and brightest all around the world” (Obama 2013, January 29). Explaining the significance of these “brilliant students,” Obama argues, “[a]fter all, immigrants helped start businesses like Google and Yahoo. They created entire new industries” (Obama 2013, January 29). He posits “big ideas,” as the source of these new industries and businesses when he suggests, “[r]ight now in one of those classrooms, there’s a student wrestling with how to turn their big idea, their Intel or Instagram, into a big business” (Obama 2013, January 29).

Here, Obama’s discourse more deeply reflects talent’s metonymical function, allowing the materiality of entire industries to appear as the effect of the ideas of talented individuals. Talent enables the attribution of industries to individuals by first interpreting the founder of the company as talented, and then attributing the company’s success to that individual’s intellectual labor, itself the result of their talent. As Obama’s discourse demonstrates, the ability of highly visible high-tech entrepreneurs to appear talented in the first place is a byproduct of treating the success of their companies as both evidence of and an effect of their talent. Peter Armstrong (2005) contends that as, “the language of enterprise is picked up unwitting commentators, the attribution of economic success to the entrepreneur, originally an expression of ideological conviction, seems to acquire a momentum of its own” (p. 208). Thus, the repeated invocation of particular high-tech entrepreneurs as representative examples of talent allows their talent to appear unquestioned because it reinforces the the claims to authorship that enabled their appearance as talented in the first place. Moreover, these individuals come to serve as

representative cases illustrating the economic importance of talent as such, enabling the attraction of talent to appear imperative in the first place.

As it enables the attribution of innovation to individuals, talent erases an entire network of institutional and infrastructural dynamics undergirding both entrepreneurship and high-tech innovation. Allowing the success of a company to serve as evidence of talent, and talent to make “big ideas” a coherent source of innovation folds the complexity of innovation into a “moment of inspiration.” As Mariana Mazzucato (2014) writes,

it is essential to understand innovation as a collective process, involving an extensive division of labour that can include many different stakeholders. As a foundation for the innovation process, the State typically makes investments in physical and human infrastructure that individual employees and business enterprises would be unable to fund on their own, both because of the high amount of fixed costs that investment in innovation requires and because of the degree of uncertainty that such investment entails. The State also subsidizes the investments that enable individual employees and business enterprises to participate in the innovation process. Academic researchers often interact with industry experts in the knowledge-generation process. Within industry, there are research consortia that may include companies that are otherwise in competition with one another (p. 199).

Viewed as the complex, collective process Mazzucato describes, the attribution of innovation to “talent” and its “moments of inspiration” appears as a ridiculous oversimplification made coherent by the self-propelling operation of metonymy and *post hoc* reasoning.



## **Implications – Competitiveness, Attraction, and the War for Talent**

Above, I introduced international competitiveness as a key site at which nation-states are made to govern themselves in accordance within a broader neoliberal imaginary. In turn, international competitiveness problematizes state governance through a “global war for talent” in which talent functions metonymically, enabling the attraction of talented immigrants to appear as the origin for US economic growth and productivity. By positioning US strategies for attracting immigrants along side those of other nations, the global war for talent and competitiveness drive the convergence of national immigration policies. Feinblatt contends,

As China offers generous stipends, access to prestigious incubators, honorary titles and other benefits to lure home the scientists and engineers who come to America to study, we turn these innovators away. As Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore and Chile offer visas and other incentives to attract entrepreneurs to their countries, we make it nearly impossible for most entrepreneurs to come here (Feinblatt 2013, January 30).

The increasingly generous benefits offered by other nations, combined with the global mobility of talented immigrants, suggest that in order to attract these individuals the US must be willing to offer increasingly lucrative benefits and preferential treatment to the talented. Moreover, the competitive conditions in which adjustments to immigration law occur creates an escalating process of “borrowing,” in which each attempt to avoid being outbid precipitates a new round of increasingly aggressive bidding (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 79). In the process, the offer of membership within a national polity becomes a “recruitment tool” situated within a broader “settlement package” offered to attract an elite group of potential migrants to settle within a

particular state (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 102-103). This precipitates a world in which “talents constitute a form of movable entitlement without formal citizenship” (Ong 2006, p. 16).

As the competition for talented immigrants heats up, the distribution of resources, care, and recognition becomes an increasingly unequal expression of the need to satisfy the talented in order to attract them. Indeed, states do not simply compete for “talented immigrants” from other countries, but must also concern themselves with staving off the potential flight of the already existing talented people within their own countries. As a result, therefore, the select group of people deemed talented exercise a disproportionate degree of political influence because the global competition to attract them grants them international mobility (Brown and Tannock 2009, p. 383-384). This creates a feedback loop in which those not deemed talented are consigned to “permanent temporary” status and deprived of resources as neoliberal governance becomes increasingly calibrated to the narrow attraction of talent (Shachar and Hirschl 2013, p. 103-105). These tendencies were exhibited, for example, in a 2013 debate over a bill to increase visas for talented immigrants, by decreasing visas for “low-skilled workers,” a debate which “seemed to pit high-skilled foreign workers against illegal immigrants and those admitted to the U.S. through family ties” (Song 2013, February 6). The neoliberal strategies of competitive attraction in which the “global war for talent,” is based, therefore, are producing a transformation of citizenship in which the global mobility of a select few requires states to cater to their needs even if they are not citizens, simply because of the prospect of attracting them. The underside of this globally mobile class of talented individuals, however, is a massive population without citizenship anywhere, since their relative lack of mobility eliminates the impetus for states to cater to their needs or provide them opportunity.

The unequal effects of competition for talent appear particularly unethical in light of the previous section. Indeed, in addition to the unequal effects of governance as global neoliberal competition, the attribution of innovation and productivity to individuals through the rhetorical operation of talent appears to reward power politics and image management while portraying an overly simplistic account of technological development. “Talent” functions rhetorically, metonymically inserting ineffable, extraordinary ability as a cause for the success of high-tech immigrant entrepreneurs’s businesses, while creating a bandwagon effect in which the attribution of economic innovation and productivity to these individuals compounds, reinforcing the apparent strength and plausibility of their claim to authorship. Reversing the unequal effects of talent, therefore, requires re-distributing attribution and credit for productivity and innovation, allowing them to be seen as emerging within complex, collective, and infrastructurally dense networks of collaborative practice. Critically engaging the ways in which neoliberalism relies upon naturalizing the obligations, responsibilities, and ethical boundaries of the individual, therefore, offers a useful wedge for criticizing the accelerating inequality of the “global war for talent.” In the next chapter, I dig deeper into talent’s role in enabling the attribution of innovation to individuals by analyzing biographical constructions of Steve Jobs’ genius.

### **Chapter III:**

#### **The Apple Doesn't Fall Far From the Tree of Knowledge: Steve Jobs and the Taste for Genius**

On January 22, 1984, the Oakland Raiders scored an early third quarter touchdown against the Washington Redskins, extending their lead in Super Bowl XVIII (Isaacson 2011, p. 167). As the game transitioned to commercial, audience members prepared to watch a string of advertisements presumably little different from those that had preceded them for the first two quarters. Instead, televisions across the country went black for a full two seconds, before displaying a horribly dystopian image; a gray-scale scene with a series of skinhead drones, marching in lockstep while their leader spat a hate-filled monologue in the background. For an instant, the camera showed a woman with shining blonde hair, dressed in a white top and orange shorts running towards the camera, before switching back to the drones, now seated before a massive screen displaying an enormous image of their leader's speaking head. The running woman raced onto the screen, now shown holding a massive hammer. While the leader's diatribe continued in the background, the woman swung the hammer like a shot put and hurled it at the screen. As the screen exploded with light, text scrolled onto viewers' televisions, and a narrator said, "On January 24<sup>th</sup> Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*" (Isaacson 2011, p. 168).

The commercial was an immediate "sensation," with TV stations across the country running specials on the ad that night, giving it a "viral life" that was unheard of for its time period (Isaacson 2011, p. 168). Although Apple's iconic advertisement would later be called "the greatest commercial of all time," by several publications, the company's board almost decided not to air the spot; it was only through Steve Jobs's insistence that the company agreed to go

ahead with the advertisement (Isaacson 2011, p. 165-166). As Walter Isaacson, the author of the official biography *Steve Jobs* tells it, Jobs was able to convince the head of marketing, Bill Campbell, to run the spot despite the reluctance of the other members of the board (Isaacson 2011, p. 167). While Jobs himself did not design the commercial, Isaacson argues that the ad allowed Jobs to reaffirm his desired self-image of cool rebelliousness, positioning both he and his company as representative of individuality and creativity against a dominant corporate culture of mindless, rote productivity (Isaacson 2011, p. 165-167).

Jobs's branding of his image has been largely successful. In the years since the 1984 advertisement, Jobs has become virtually synonymous with "creative genius" (Griggs 2011, October 6). President Obama himself noted that after Jobs's death, "the world has lost a visionary" (Schulman 2011, October 5). Even the release of Isaacson's biography, which depicted Jobs's workaholic tendencies, ruthless management style, and initial abandonment of his first child was incapable of disturbing his status as a genius (Austen 2012, August 23). Instead, somewhat perversely, they have only served to amplify Jobs's genius, allowing his life story to emerge as, "an odd sort of holy scripture for entrepreneurs—a gospel and an antigospel at the same time" (Austen 2012, August 23). Despite complex negotiation of the *morality* of Jobs's behavior, therefore, he has become indissociable from creative genius, a great mind regardless of whether his career is read as an expression of good or evil.

In the previous chapter, I argued the discourse of talent operates metonymically, attributing innovation to individuals already considered talented by allowing concrete activity to appear as the expression of creative, ineffable ability. As such, talent purports to merely demonstrate the importance of unique characteristics already possessed by these individuals that allowed them to gain their public visibility as talented in the first place. The circulation of Steve

Jobs as genius illustrates the metonymical function of talent through a specific case. By presupposing Jobs as a genius, or a talented individual, Apple's enduring global success and popularity serve as evidence *ex post facto* of his superior intellectual and creative abilities. The website "Steve Jobs Would Never ([www.stevejobswouldnever.com](http://www.stevejobswouldnever.com))," which aggregates the tweets of Apple users invoking Steve Jobs's name to complain about the company's contemporary products, attests that even posthumously Jobs's genius continues to haunt the company, as if Apple's products were themselves suddenly lacking the trace of his ineffable creativity. This begs the question of how Jobs's genius was able to appear so incontrovertible that he is capable of exercising effects from beyond the grave. For numerous commentators, including Isaacson, the source Jobs's genius is *taste*, a faculty that enables him to anticipate consumers' desires with near-mystical precision. The story of the 1984 advertisement is itself a microcosm for the pervasive belief in Jobs-as-tastemaker. It is not Jobs who designed the commercial; instead, he was the individual with the sense of good taste to fight for the ad, positioning himself against the entire Apple board and their lack of creative vision.

The circulation of Jobs's genius by virtue of his possession of "delicate taste" has deep roots within the rhetorical tradition, serving as a key figure for resolving Enlightenment anxieties about the universality of standards for criticism. As such, the construction of Jobs is of particular interest to rhetoric because his circulation is conditioned by and propagates a model of genius itself grounded in the rhetorical tradition. Examining the relations of power constituted within the rhetorical tradition's construction of "genius" as "a man with delicate taste," offers powerful insight into the politics of taste that inform the politics of talent in general, and Steve Jobs's genius in particular. Viewed in light of the rhetorical tradition's treatment of taste, the circulation of Steve Jobs as genius has clear implications for economic inequality. I argue that

distinguishing the particularity of Steve Jobs's genius justifies and intensifies existing relations of economic inequality, creating a hierarchy between privileged knowledge economy workers and a broader, less-skilled labor force.

In what follows, I first investigate the circulation of Steve Jobs in popular media such as biographies, blogs, and mainstream news media editorials. I pay especially close attention to the particular ways in which these accounts distinguish Jobs's genius from other forms of extraordinary intellectual capacity. Next, I examine theories of taste emerging within the rhetorical tradition of the Enlightenment, highlighting the relations of power that act as conditions of possibility for an individual to appear to possess "delicate taste." Finally, I analyze the manifestation of the politics of taste in the contemporary neoliberal imaginary. In particular, I highlight the way the circulation of Jobs as genius has been taken up in broader debates concerning economic inequality, illustrating the decisive role his circulation has played in justifying a compensation hierarchy between "men of taste" and low-skilled workers.

### **Steve Jobs and the Particularity of Genius**

A powerful, recurring form in popular media characterizations of Steve Jobs is the explicit acknowledgement of Jobs as a genius, followed by a subsequent move to specify its particularity. In Walter Isaacson's biography (2011), this tendency is pervasive to the point of becoming the central preoccupation of the work. Repeatedly, Isaacson distinguishes Jobs from Steve Wozniak, Jobs's best friend and the "wizard" engineer that designed the Apple I and Apple II computers (p. 30). He summarizes their partnership by positing, "Wozniak would be the gentle wizard coming up with a neat invention that he would have been happy to just give away, and Jobs would figure out how to make it user-friendly, put it together in a package, market it, and make a few bucks" (p. 30). This distinction reaches a dramatic crescendo in a confrontation

between Wozniak's father, Jerry, himself a distinguished engineer, and Jobs, in which Jerry Wozniak claims that Jobs doesn't "deserve shit" because he hasn't "produced anything" (p. 73). Throughout, Isaacson continually highlights Jobs's limited engineering abilities, emphasizing the mathematical and technical brilliance of engineers such as Rod Holt and Bill Atkinson, the individuals responsible for the switching power-supply and bitmapping that are used in many modern computers and were essential to the success of the Apple II and the Macintosh (p. 74; p. 99-100). In one telling passage, Isaacson accuses Jobs of "stretching his experience" when Jobs says that, "Woz was the first person I'd met who knew more electronics than I did," an intervention in which Isaacson actively intervenes in Jobs's self-characterization as an individual with extraordinary engineering abilities (p. 25).

It is in Bill Gates, however, that Isaacson finds his most reliable foil for explaining the special type of genius Jobs possesses. He compares the relationship between Gates and Jobs as a "rivalry of two orbiting superstars," analogizing their competition to that of Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, and Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton (p. 171). Isaacson contrasts the two at length, writing that,

Gates was good at computer coding, unlike Jobs, and his mind was more practical, disciplined, and abundant in analytic processing power. Jobs was more intuitive and romantic and had a greater instinct for making technology usable, design delightful, and interfaces friendly. He had a passion for perfection, which made him fiercely demanding, and he managed by charisma and scattershot intensity. Gates was more methodical; he held tightly scheduled product review meetings where he would cut to the heart of issues with lapidary skill (p. 172).



In another telling passage, Isaacson quotes former Apple software engineer Andy Hertzfeld summarizing the relationship between Gates and Jobs, “Each one thought he was smarter than the other one, but Steve generally treated Bill as someone who was slightly inferior, especially in matters of taste and style” (p. 172). Isaacson extends the distinction in a *New York Times* article printed shortly after the release of *Steve Jobs*. In this article, Isaacson draws a distinction between “super-smart” and “super-ingenious”; “Bill Gates is super-smart, but Steve Jobs was super-ingenious. The primary distinction, I think, is the ability to apply creativity and aesthetic sensibilities to a challenge” (Isaacson 2011, October 29). Unlike Wozniak and Gates, Isaacson distinguishes Jobs as “intuitive” and quick to eschew “empirical analysis” for “experiential wisdom” (Isaacson 2011, October 29). Thus, while the terrain of *Steve Jobs* is littered with brilliant engineers, Isaacson suggests that Steve Jobs himself operates on a different plane with a special kind of knowledge—reinforcing Jobs’s uniqueness from his colleagues and rivals as an individual possessing an ineffable sense of creative intuition.

Far from being unique to Isaacson’s account, the notion that the source of Jobs’s genius is “taste” is remarkably consistent narrative. In *Inside Apple*, Adam Lashinsky (2012), argues, “Jobs also dominated Apple in an intangible way. He was the final arbiter on matters of taste” (p. 304). Quoted in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette’s obituary of Jobs, computer science professor Raj Reddy opines, “What Steve represented was a unique blend of taste, good taste, and good vision, and he was able to put himself in the shoes of users like you and me, and was able to see what they need” (Kurtz 2011, October 6). Offering a concurring opinion, an obituary in the New York Times contends Jobs,

put much stock in the notion of “taste,” a word he used frequently. It was a sensibility that shone in products that looked like works of art and delighted users. Great products,

he said, were a triumph of taste, of “trying to expose yourself to the best things humans have done and then trying to bring those things into what you are doing. Regis McKenna, a longtime Silicon Valley marketing executive to whom Mr. Jobs turned in the late 1970s to help shape the Apple brand, said Mr. Jobs’s genius lay in his ability to simplify complex, highly engineered products, “to strip away the excess layers of business, design and innovation until only the simple, elegant reality remained” (Markoff 2011, October 5).

As the above descriptions indicate, popular media accounts rarely question whether or not Steve Jobs can be accurately described as a genius. Instead, they presuppose his genius and instead endeavor to explain its particularity, consistently figuring him as a genius by virtue of his transcendent sense of taste. In this case taste, therefore, is interchangeable with “talent” and “genius,” because they each operate metonymically.

The circulation of Apple itself reflects the characterization of Jobs as a “man of delicate taste.” Apple’s products are themselves circulated as “designs,” objects whose attractiveness is derived from their aesthetic power. As a company, Apple’s “heart is in design - when it hits a bump in the road, its instinct is to rejig how its products look” (Manjoo 2013, June 13). The importance of design translates to the everyday level of organizational functioning in which, “Apple’s designers have long had an influence in the company which is barely imaginable to most designers elsewhere” (Parker 2015). As Joshua Rothman (2016, April 1) argues, “The most obviously unusual thing about Apple is that it’s a technology company whose fortunes have been shaped by our ideas about taste.” The importance Apple places on aesthetically attractive design, therefore, is understood both as the core feature of the company itself, and as a byproduct of the function of taste.

Consistently, Jobs is figured as the wizard behind the curtain of Apple's unique aesthetic. In a glowingly positive assessment of Jobs, for example, Tim Nudd (2011, October 10) argues, Steve Jobs made computers and music players and telephones and tablets. But mostly what he sold were two things—beauty and truth. As Apple's core brand values, they were inseparable. His products looked better, and, he firmly believed, they were better. By being more beautiful, inside and out, they would improve your life. By being better than rival products, they would improve the world and move the culture forward. In this sense, good taste wasn't a luxury, Jobs felt. It was a moral choice, particularly for the marketers who would shape technology's future.

Jobs's return to Apple in 2000 is offered as evidence of the important role he played in the company's design principles. An obituary in the Mail & Guardian offers a representative case, positing,

By the late nineties Apple was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and collapse. In typical fashion Jobs quickly drew together a group of creative and technical geniuses and began to transform the company from within. The early fruit of this renaissance, the brightly coloured Apple iMac, was a huge success, bought as much for its beautiful design as its capabilities. And so, a new template for Apple was born: beautiful, desirable, functional (Fairweather 2011, October 7).

Isaacson locates the source of Apple's specific aesthetic in Jobs's early interest in the Bauhaus movement. He contends Jobs's interest in the movement began following his attendance at the June 1981 International Design Conference, after which Jobs embraced Bauhaus' emphasis on "clean lines and forms," and "rationality and functionality" (Isaacson 2011, p. 125-126).

According to Isaacson, Jobs believed the cardinal virtue of the design of Herbert Bayer, a central

figure in the Bauhaus movement, was his emphasis on simplicity (Isaacson 2011, pp. 126). Taking up Bayer's vision, Jobs figured Apple's entire philosophy as, "Let's make it simple. Really simple" (Isaacson 2011, p. 126-127). He wanted Apple's machines to be "beautiful and white," minimalist in their design and simple to use, producing a high-quality good that involved thoughtful design from end-to-end (Isaacson 2011, p. 125-127). As his incorporation of the Bauhaus aesthetic into the technical design of hardware makes clear, the uniqueness of Jobs' taste came from, "combining an appreciation of the humanities with an understanding of science" (Isaacson 2011, October 29). As these accounts demonstrate, the circulation of Steve Jobs as a "man of delicate taste" capable of synthesizing artistic and technical sensibilities translates directly into the perception of Apple as a company with its "heart in design," allowing Jobs to appear to be the architect of the company's unique marketing and aesthetic appeal.

Jobs's taste is not, however, merely read as a talent for ornamental design. Instead, his aesthetic mode of genius is figured as driving the company's more technical achievements as well, particularly his stubborn insistence that engineering should follow his obsessive personal preferences. In Isaacson's biography, the switching power-source developed by Rod Holt is the product of Jobs's insistence that the Apple II not rely on a fan, which he believed would be "noisy" and "distracting" (Isaacson 2011, p. 74). He also posits the Macintosh's one-button mouse, capable of moving seamlessly in all directions, as the product of Jobs's demand that documents should not "lurch," and instead should "flow" across the screen (Isaacson 2011, p. 100-101). The multi-touch technology used by both the iPhone and iPad was created because Jobs forced his design team to develop a tablet without using a stylus or a keyboard, claiming that he wanted the user's interactions with the screen to be "fluid and flexible" (Isaacson 2011, p. 467-469). Corroborating Jobs's role in the iPhone's touch-screen, Fred Vogelstein (2013,

October 4) notes, “few even thought about making touch-screen technology the centerpiece of a new kind of phone until Jobs started really pushing the idea in mid-2005.” At times, Jobs’s aesthetic sensibility is imbued with an almost mystical capacity to alter reality itself. According to Isaacson, Jobs’s Apple colleagues referred to his practice of letting his own taste form the contours of the possible as a “reality distortion field” (Isaacson 2011, p. 117). Andy Hertzfeld describes the reality distortion field as, “a confounding *mélange* of a charismatic rhetorical style, indomitable will, and eagerness to blend any fact to fit the purpose at hand” (Isaacson 2011, p. 118). As Jobs himself put it to Bill Atkinson while admiring his own Porsche, “Great art stretches the taste, it doesn’t follow the taste” (Isaacson 2011, p. 128). Despite Jobs’s lack of engineering knowledge, therefore, his sense of taste was understood as the generative force driving Apple’s various innovations.

In the wake of Jobs’s death, the scrutiny applied to Apple in general and new CEO Tim Cook in particular illustrates that Jobs’s circulation as a “man of delicate taste,” attributed him a particularly extreme claim to authorship. After his passing, “the prevailing question wasn’t whether Tim Cook could succeed him, but whether anyone could” (Vogelstein 2013, October 4). As Yukari Iwatani Kane (2014, February 28) contends,

Even as he took control of Apple's empire, Cook couldn't escape his boss's shadow. How could anyone compete with a visionary so brilliant that not even death could make him go away? The genius trap had long been set for Jobs’s successor. Apple had been defined by him for more than a decade. Design, product development, marketing strategies and executive appointments—all hinged on his tastes. Apple's accomplishments weren't Jobs’s alone, but he had taken credit for most of them, which further fed his legend. One

employee even owned a car with the vanity plate "WWSJD": What Would Steve Jobs Do?

The circulation of Jobs as a genius is so inextricably bound up with Apple, therefore, that he continues to exercise effects on the perception of the company's market valuation and products from beyond the grave. In the process, his death reveals the enormous extent in which Apple's success as a company is attributed to Jobs's perceived transcendent faculty of taste.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, the process of attribution is laden with politics. In circulating Jobs as a genius responsible for Apple's success, popular media characterizations of him draw upon the cultural and historical sediment of the rhetorical tradition, particularly its theory of taste. The history of rhetoric, particularly the Enlightenment struggle to establish universal "standards of criticism," offers a rich resource for examining the "politics of taste." In turn, the laying bare the power relations underlying taste complicates the straightforward attribution of Apple's success to Jobs's supposedly transcendent aesthetic sensibility. In the next section, I analyze work by David Hume, Hugh Blair, and instructors of practical oratory, drawing attention to the historical relations of power through which their work gains its sense of coherence.

### **Taste in the Rhetorical Tradition of the Enlightenment**

The emergence of taste within the rhetorical tradition occurred as a response to Enlightenment anxieties about securing standards of judgment against the threat of linguistic relativism. David Hume (2001) argues, "the sentiments of men [sic] often differ with regard to beauty and deformity of all kinds, even while their general discourse is the same" (p. 831). The stakes of differences in standards of beauty are not simply aesthetic disagreements. Instead, for Hume, they index a more fundamental separation between sense and referent or "sentiment and

object” (p. 831). This gap implicates the possibility of evaluating virtue and ethical conduct, and potentially even knowledge itself, since it implies that although terms such as “justice, humanity, magnanimity, prudence, veracity,” are used ubiquitously, they carry different meanings and are applied in different ways by particular people (p. 831). For Hugh Blair, these concerns were intimately bound up with the judgment of rhetorical performance because, “in order to criticize oratory effectively, the critic must have some criteria to which he can appeal” (Cohen 1958, p. 274). The search for universal standards of taste, therefore, is a proxy for a wider Enlightenment struggle to mend the gap between sense and reference, thus staving off the potential crisis of morality relativism portends.

In the case of aesthetic judgment, relativism is represented by the ancient proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum*—“in matters of taste, there can be no dispute.” For Hume and Blair, this proverb is both needlessly pessimistic about the extent of the problem at hand, and dangerous in its presumption that aesthetic perception, and hence its criteria for judgment, are purely internal to the mind of the judge and do not capture the features of the aesthetic object. Indeed, for both Hume and Blair the imperialism of the Western canon offers a “common sense” resource for resolving most disputes of taste. As Hume contends, “Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he [sic] had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean” (p. 832). Invoking pre-existing imperial and colonial hierarchies, therefore, allows Hume and Blair to reduce the problems confronting standards of taste to two issues: adjudicating disputes about works of relatively equal quality, and explaining how works of genius are initially recognized as such.

Hume offers “delicate taste,” as a solution to this problem, arguing particular people are capable of discriminating the various pleasures produced by a work of art in such minute detail that they actually produce an aesthetic map of the object itself. “Delicate taste,” therefore, refers to a faculty in which, “the organs are so fine, as to allow nothing to escape them; and at the same time so exact as to perceive every ingredient in the composition: This we call delicacy of taste” (p. 834). Rather than roughly judging a work as a whole, those possessing delicate taste are able to discriminate between its various parts, apprehending the particular pleasures they produce while isolating the source of any defects within the work (Hume 2001, p. 835-836; Cohen 1958, p. 269). In practice, however, there are numerous barriers to delicate taste that render it an exceedingly rare faculty (Hume 2001, p. 837). Moreover, while both Hume and Blair concur taste can be cultivated through exposure to “great works,” they largely agree rules of composition and interpretation are insufficient to cultivate “delicate taste” (Hume 2001, p. 832-833; Cohen 1958, p. 267-269). For both Hume and Blair, therefore, the solution to the threat of relativism is to rely on the judgment of critics with faculties of taste so refined they can apprehend the internal relations within an aesthetic object.

The notion of “delicacy of taste,” however, merely introduces a second order problem: determining the particular individuals possessing delicate taste. Hume lays out a variety of qualities possessed by those with “delicate taste,” including displaying delicacy of taste through repeat performance, avoiding prejudice in interpretation, and the ability to compare works across historical periods and nationalities (Hume 2001, p. 835-836). Fundamentally, however, the scarcity of critics capable of appreciating artistic genius renders those individuals possessing delicate taste as geniuses themselves. Hume argues this genius minimizes the problem of identifying those with “delicate taste,” contending,



Though men [sic] of delicate taste be rare, they are easily to be distinguished in society, by the soundness of their understanding and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind. The ascendant, which they acquire, gives a prevalence to that lively approbation, with which they receive any productions of genius, and renders it generally predominant (p. 838).

Thus, according to Hume, “delicate taste” can only be identified by virtue of demonstrations of their faculties. The determination of those considered to possess “delicate taste,” therefore, is intensely political.

The problem of ascertaining if an individual possesses “delicate taste,” however, is riddled with paradox. On the one hand, Hume’s notion of “delicate taste,” is genius capable of grasping aesthetic works in themselves by eliminating the gap between objects and the sentiments they elicit in their audience. Although Hume argues “taste” can be refined through training, “delicate taste” implies a level of perception so refined that it occupies another, transcendental level of reality separated entirely from more ordinary expressions of taste. As such, the faculty of “delicate taste” is an internal idiosyncrasy of the individual genius, and remains abstract and ineffable because it operates on another, intuitive order irreducible to rationality. The very impetus for “delicate taste,” illustrates the impossibility of capturing this sort of genius within language since it is language’s difference from itself, its separation of sentiment and object, sense and reference, signifier and signified that the “man of taste” purports to traverse. “Delicate taste,” therefore, does not purport to be a form of genius that *interprets* aesthetic objects. Instead, Hume’s notion of “delicate taste” *grounds interpretation*, promising access to transcendence through the mediated person of the genius.

On the other hand, however, the mediation of aesthetic transcendence through the figure of the genius means “delicacy of taste” is never present in itself. Instead, “delicacy of taste” is revealed only in glimpses, through particular acts of critical reception suggesting a critic might be a genius. The inaccessibility of “delicacy of taste” outside the immediate faculty of the genius, noted above, produces a conundrum in which ascertaining if a particular individual possesses “delicate taste” is not simply difficult but constitutively impossible. The interpreter faced with a potential genius is confronted with the question as to whether this potential genius offers glimpses of an inner, transcendental aesthetic sensibility, or whether those glimpses are merely the interpreter’s own perception allowing this individual’s behavior to appear to gesture towards “delicate taste.” Genius as “delicacy of taste” operates, therefore, as what I term a “spectral faculty,” which is neither present nor absent but instead remains ghostly and uncertain.

The spectral quality of “delicate taste,” however, does not mean that determinations of genius are an individual affair confronted in a singular context by each interpreter. Instead, genius is revealed by the capacity of the “organ” to appreciate those works themselves generally acknowledged to be expressions of genius by other “men of taste” (Hume 2001, p. 833). As a result, taste becomes the self-reinforcing expression of the aesthetic preferences of persons already possessing status, since their canon is itself the standard-bearer against which genius is revealed. “Delicate taste,” therefore, is simultaneously a “spectral faculty” that can only be accessed in mediated form through the “man of taste,” and an imperialist expression of the preferences of the powerful. Hugh Blair provides a stark example of the relationship between racist colonialism and taste, questioning whether there is “anyone who will seriously maintain that the taste of a Hottentot or a Laplander is as delicate and as correct as that of a Longinus or an Addison?” (Cohen 1958, p. 271). He constructs a geography of power, suggesting “delicate

taste” is only to be found, “in situations which are conducive to the proper exertions of taste,” precluding it from emerging in spaces and times that are “uncivilized” (Cohen 1958, p. 271-272). By identifying those already in positions of power as “men of delicate taste,” and by presupposing the emergence of “delicate taste” to be restricted only to “civilized” geographical space, Enlightenment rhetorical theorists naturalize colonial power relations that act as a condition of possibility for authorizing an individual’s possession of “delicate taste.” Subsequently, those possessing “delicate taste,” are able to discipline the public into accepting their tastes as transcendental by translating them into canon. Once a “general standard of taste” has been established, Samuel P. Newman (1868) writes, individuals are required “to correct any particular influence which circumstances may have had on his [sic] own emotions” thus acquiring “a taste which is a conformity with the general standard of taste” (p. 51). As the public’s tastes are disciplined in accordance with those authorized as possessing “delicate taste,” the taste of geniuses appears as the expression of a transcendent aesthetic sensibility, in turn inducing intensified management of consensus.

The notion of “delicate taste” embedded within the rhetorical tradition is spectral, creating irresolvable uncertainty as to whether an individual is “really” a genius, or if the interpreter has merely read genius into their behavior. At the same time, the Enlightenment notion of “delicate taste” as transcendent naturalizes an imperial, racialized, and colonial power politics allowing that individual to appear as a genius by virtue of their acknowledgement of pre-existing “standards of taste.” The systems of power relations produced and authorized through rhetorical conceptions of taste offer profound purchase for understanding the stakes of Jobs’s status as “man of delicate taste,” illustrating the vicious inequality that enables “genius” to appear transcendent through metonymical power politics. In the section that follows, I highlight

several cases that offer a glimpse into the power politics by which Steve Jobs enabled his own circulation as genius. Additionally, I examine the way the circulation of Steve Jobs as a “man of delicate taste” has been taken up to justify relations of economic inequality, enabling a hierarchy between the well-compensated “men of taste” who are attributed authorship for production, and “low-skilled workers,” who produce material goods.

### **Compensation and the Price of Inequality**

The attribution of Steve Jobs as “author of Apple,” is made possible by his circulation as a “man of taste.” The pervasiveness of Jobs as genius appears to confirm the delicacy of his taste, establishing it as incontrovertible. The viability of this interpretation, however, depends upon reading Jobs’s behavior as a necessary extension of the idiosyncrasy of his genius. As the previous section illustrated, taste’s spectrality enables signs of genius to proliferate everywhere. The discursive availability of Jobs as the source of Apple’s innovation, therefore, depends upon presupposing the “fact” of his genius and assimilating contrary evidence to this assumption by reading the “effects” of his genius, Apple’s products, as evidence of transcendental aesthetic sensibility..

There are several places, however, where Jobs’s power politics are laid bare. As the previous section suggested, once a “general standard” of taste has been proposed, the public is expected to discipline itself in terms of that standard. These relations of power translate directly into Jobs’s struggle to establish the supremacy of his aesthetic vision and circulate himself as genius. Even within Apple itself, Jobs dictatorially refused input on matters of taste, preferring to situate himself as sole author. As Lashinsky (2012) writes,

User democracy is the antithesis of how Apple operates. Jobs famously told customers what they wanted. He didn’t ask their opinion. ‘The Apple way is that Steve picked the

color he liked and that's the color,' [a] former Apple engineer concluded. 'He was willing to listen to counterarguments. But if you [were] arguing taste or opinion, it was a losing battle.' This view of Apple as a kind of consumer-electronics fashion house leaves little hope for a new creative or entrepreneurial genius to rise from the ranks (p. 304-305).

If Jobs's genius is presumed from the beginning, the tyrannical attitude and personality revealed in this account appear as simply expressions of the delicate temperament of genius. Ben Austen (2012, August 23), for example, contends, "He put his uncompromising and sometimes brutal personality into the creation of products that strike us as beautiful, even uplifting." In these accounts, "Jobs's failings as a person, rather than impeding his legend, actually bolster it," (Garber 2015, September 3). Read according to this perspective, therefore, Steve Jobs perfectly fulfills the Enlightenment role of the "man of taste," acting as guarantor of aesthetic transcendence by producing a shift in the ancient proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum*—"in matters of taste, there can be no disputing Steve Jobs."

As the above case demonstrates, the spectrality of taste makes extricating evidence of Jobs's genius from his willingness to ruthlessly enforce his own aesthetic preferences a function of the prejudices of the interpreter. Is he willing to enforce his aesthetic vision because his taste is truly superior? Or is Jobs's appearance as a genius the byproduct of a "reality distortion field," a complicated metonymical alchemy enabling ruthless corporate authoritarianism to appear as transcendent aesthetic vision? Perhaps, as Austen suggests, "Jobs has become a Rorschach test, a screen onto which entrepreneurs and executives can project a justification of their own lives: choices they would have made anyway, difficult traits they already possess" (Austen 2012, August 23). Yet by confidently reducing Jobs's genius to a byproduct of the interpreter's

perspective, even this perspective is incapable of avoiding its own set of interpretive presuppositions.

Isaacson relays a story about Xerox, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates that illustrates the high stakes these interpretive questions carry for the attribution of authorship. In 1979, Apple made an agreement with Xerox, allowing the latter company to purchase \$1 million worth of Apple shares in exchange for access to Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). At PARC, Xerox had been working on a computer with a user interface simpler than DOS command lines, which was technically termed a "graphical-user interface," but referred to by Xerox engineers as a "desktop" (Isaacson 2011, p. 96). A condition of Xerox's agreement with Apple was a PARC technology demonstration for Jobs and Apple engineers Bill Atkinson and Jef Raskin. As Isaacson tells it,

The Smalltalk demonstration showed three amazing features. One was how computers could be networked; the second was how object-oriented programming worked. But Jobs and his team paid little attention to these attributes because they were so amazed by the third feature, the graphical interface that was made possible by a bitmapped screen. 'It was like a veil being lifted from my eyes,' Jobs recalled. 'I could see what the future of computing was destined to be' (p. 97).

Apple immediately set out to reverse engineer the technology they'd seen at Xerox, in the process engaging in "one of the biggest heists in the chronicles of industry" (Isaacson 2011, p. 98). As Jobs told Isaacson, recalling this decisive moment, "Picasso had a saying—'good artists copy, great artists steal'—and we have always been shameless about stealing great ideas" (Isaacson 2011, p. 98). Taken in a vacuum, Apple's "heist" and Jobs's interpretation of it suggest both a company and an executive with a loose perspective concerning authorship. Jobs's

criticism of Bill Gates, however, offers a quick rebuttal to this interpretation. Isaacson recalls Jobs said that Gates was, “basically unimaginative,” evidenced by the fact that, “He just shamelessly ripped off other people’s ideas” (Isaacson 2011, p. 173).

Indeed, the falling out between Steve Jobs and Bill Gates over the desktop interface reveals Jobs’s apparent belief in the value of theft to artistic process as inseparable from the power politics underlying authorship. While working with Apple on Macintosh software, Microsoft reverse-engineered a version of the desktop interface. After waiting out the one-year exclusivity clause in its contract with Apple, Microsoft announced plans for its own desktop interface software to be released on the IBM PC. Jobs demanded Gates meet with him, and as Isaacson describes,

Gates found himself surrounded by ten Apple employees who were eager to watch their boss assail him. Jobs didn’t disappoint his troops. ‘You’ re ripping us off!’ he shouted. ‘I trusted you, and now you’re stealing from us!’ Hertzfeld recalled that Gates just sat there coolly, looking Steve in the eye, before hurling back, in his squeaky voice, what became a classic zinger. ‘Well, Steve, I think there’s more than one way of looking at it. I think it’s more like we both had this rich neighbor named Xerox and I broke into his house to steal the TV set and found out that you had already stolen it’ (Isaacson 2011, p. 178).

This exchange between Gates and Jobs illustrates the power politics involved not only in attribution of authorship in copyright, but also attribution of genius itself. Jobs interprets and circulates Apple’s “Xerox heist” as an expression of his artistic process, an expression of aesthetic sensibility worthy of comparison to Picasso. Using almost exactly the same language, however, he judges Microsoft’s appropriation of the exact same technology as an expression of Gates’ lack of imagination and creativity. Here, Jobs repeats the basic move of the

Enlightenment rhetorical tradition, treating appreciation of his particular tastes as a pre-requisite to authorization as genius. As such, Gates' rebuttal to Jobs is not simply an exposure of the self-interested pretentiousness underlying Jobs's version of events. Gates also illustrates the complex, often opaque, politics underlying the attribution of authorship for innovations. Contrary to the register of "delicate taste" as aesthetic transcendence arising within the Enlightenment, the Xerox heist foregrounds the role power politics play in the circulation of Jobs's genius because innovations like the desktop interface are the very materials used to substantiate his "delicate taste," and in turn his claim to authorship.

The circulation of Steve Jobs as a "man of delicate taste" has enabled him to operate as shorthand for "creative genius" in US economic inequality debates. In these debates, Jobs as "man of taste," is invoked as a representative of the wealthiest 1% of Americans (Sevmore 2015, p. 843). By re-circulating Steve Jobs as genius, these accounts attribute authorship of Apple's innovation and productivity to Jobs. In the process, his extraordinary wealth appears merely as just desserts for his staggering level of social contribution. As *The Economist* (2011, January 22) argues, "Inequality jars less if the rich have earned their fortunes. Steve Jobs is a billionaire because people love Apple's products" ("The Rise and Rise" 2011, p. 5). Steve Jobs's "delicate taste," therefore, provides pivotal legitimation for inequality by naturalizing it as the byproduct of the market's price-signal, a mechanism that the introduction showed to be unassailable within the terms of a neoliberal imaginary.

Former Harvard President Larry Summers's review of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty's best-selling criticism of wealth inequality, offers a clear case of Jobs's role as shorthand for creative genius. Summers (2014) explains economic inequality by contending,



[T]here is the basic truth that technology and globalization give greater scope to those with extraordinary entrepreneurial ability, luck, or managerial skill. Think about the contrast between George Eastman, who pioneered fundamental innovations in photography, and Steve Jobs. Jobs had an immediate global market, and the immediate capacity to implement his innovations at very low cost, so he was able to capture a far larger share of their value than Eastman. Correspondingly, while Eastman's innovations and their dissemination through the Eastman Kodak Co. provided a foundation for a prosperous middle class in Rochester for generations, no comparable impact has been created by Jobs's innovations. This type of scenario is pervasive. Most obviously, the best athletes and entertainers benefit from a worldwide market for their celebrity. But something similar is true for those with extraordinary gifts of any kind."

Here, the salience of Jobs's genius in public discourse provides the bulk of the evidence that inequality is an offshoot of the forces of technology and globalization. As his use of the possessive "Jobs's innovations," demonstrates, Summers simply presumes Jobs to be the source of Apple's success, allowing him to treat Steve Jobs and Apple as interchangeable. Presupposing Jobs as the "author of Apple" permits Summers to treat a comparison between two companies, Kodak and Apple, as a comparison between two individuals, Steve Jobs and George Eastman, themselves proxies for two distinct economic epochs. This substitution of companies for individuals allows Summers to problematize economic inequality in terms of corporate profitability, situating an ethical problem on the narrow, technical terrain of market composition. Summers' conclusion that economic inequality reflects the market's valuation of the contributions of the wealthy within changing conditions of globalization, therefore, appears less as a well-reasoned empirical assessment, and more as a function of circular logic.

Summers's equation of "celebrity" in entertainment and "extraordinary gifts" in high-tech fields is particularly telling because it explicitly posits an individual's salience as "talented" as a reliable index of technical ability and productivity. In his presumption that Steve Jobs is the source of Apple's success, Summers exhibits the metonymical substitution of Apple's products for Jobs's transcendental authorship. Rather than serving as index of skill, the circulation of an individual as genius is at least as likely to be a feedback loop of power politics and attribution bandwagon. Summers's article, therefore, clearly demonstrates talent's ability to function metonymically. By positing Jobs as a genius or "talented individual," Summers attributes authorship for Apple's products to Jobs, while simultaneously shifting economic inequality onto the terrain of *redistribution*. In the process, he provides a clear demonstration of Jobs's ability to serve as a powerful representative example of the richest 1 percent, thereby legitimating relations of inequality.

## Conclusion

In the first section, I demonstrated that the plausibility of attributing Steve Jobs with authorship of Apple's success is itself conditioned by the wide circulation of Jobs as a "man of taste." In the second section, I illustrated that Jobs's genius circulates through pathways dug into the sediment of history and culture by the Enlightenment rhetorical tradition's theory of "delicate taste," a "spectral faculty" that claims the aesthetic transcendence is revealed through demonstration of genius, itself grounded in the imperialist and colonialist politics of the Western canon. In the third section, I argued "spectrality of taste" enables the opposite relationship, allowing the political jockeying for credit for authorship to produce the appearance of transcendence. As Apple's "Xerox heist" demonstrates, separating Steve Jobs's genius from the isolated acts of attribution that substantiate it is only possible if stats as "man of taste" is

presupposed from the beginning. Larry Summers' review of Piketty emphasizes the high stakes this relationship has for economic inequality. As his invocation of Jobs shows, inequality is able to appear as a technical problem of market valuation only if talent is interpreted as a reliable, depoliticized representation of individual skill. The case of Steve Jobs demonstrates, therefore, that the legitimacy of the neoliberal imaginary depends on the political move to frame economic inequality as a problem of redistribution of resources.

At this point, clarification is in order. I am not arguing that Steve Jobs *is not* the source of Apple's productivity and corporate success. Instead, I am arguing there is a massive gap between the seemingly self-evident fashion in which Jobs's genius is attributed as the source of Apple's success, and the complex infrastructural networks and power politics underlying the process of innovation itself. Indeed, Jobs's circulation as genius has become so widespread and intensified that acknowledgment he is a genius is a presumption made even by his critics. As Mazzucato (2015) writes,

While Steve Jobs was no doubt an inspiring genius worthy of praise, the fact that the iPhone/iPad empire was built on these state-funded technologies provides a far more accurate tale of technological and economic change than what is offered by mainstream discussions. Given the critical role of the state in enabling companies like Apple, it is especially curious that the debate surrounding Apple's tax avoidance has tended to overlook this fact. Apple must pay tax not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the ultimate example of a company that requires the public purse to be large and risk-loving enough to continue making the investments that entrepreneurs like Jobs will later capitalize on (p. 18)

Mazzucato's surprise the state has not received due credit for Apple's success underestimates the role performed by the circulation of Steve Jobs as "genius." As the previous sections have argued, there is indeed reason to doubt Jobs's genius because taking its acceptance as a foregone conclusion and then moving to specify its particularity is precisely the interpretive shift performed by the various popular media that render Jobs's genius so ubiquitous and self-evident. Genius-as-taste enables Jobs to appear as explanatory cause of every element of Apple and its products' success because, as Hume argued, the transcendent ineffability of taste means the only evidence required or possible to demonstrate its delicacy is a sufficiently sophisticated capacity to appreciate the Western canon.

In the process, Jobs's circulation produces an "availability cascade," in which the attribution of Apple's achievements "genius," progressively intensifies. Timur Kuran and Cass R. Sunstein (1999) argue the effect of this "availability cascade," is that "expressed perceptions trigger chains of individual responses that make these perceptions appear increasingly plausible through their rising availability in public discourse" (p. 685). As the availability of Jobs's genius cascades, his genius mutates from a spectral black box into a black hole, exerting a gravitational field into which an entire network of state funding, Apple employees, university research, reverse engineered competitor designs, and even serendipity, luck, and accident themselves all threaten to disappear. Megan Garber (2015, September 3) offers a glimpse of this vortex when she contends,

Cut to a clip of a YouTubed tribute to Jobs starring a kid who looks to be about 10 years old. 'He made the iPhone,' the young eulogist says. 'He made the iPad. He made the iPod Touch. He made everything.' It's quite fair to say, with due respect to both the networked nature of invention and the severe limitations of the great man theory of history, that the

kid is right: The iPhone, and the many other devices Apple has produced over the years, exist because of Steve Jobs.

As the previous section showed, at stake is not simply the definitional question of “whether or not Jobs is a genius,” nor merely the source of Apple’s success. Instead, the self-propelling quality of Jobs’s claim to authorship acts as a representative case and cultural shorthand enabling economic inequality to appear as a purely technical problem of market assessment, a status equivalent to naturalization within a neoliberal imaginary.

Isaacson tells the story that after the completion of the Macintosh, Jobs made the entire design team sign their names on the inside of the computer because as he put it, “Real artists sign their work” (Isaacson 2011, p. 134). The story of the signatures narrates the spectral quality of Jobs’s taste in metaphorical form. Isaacson’s anecdote captures the sense in which Jobs’s genius, like the trace of his signature upon the computer, is always inside, a black box inside a grey box, present only through signs, like Isaacson’s biography, that gesture towards it. It is easy to visualize one of Isaacson’s readers coming to this story in his biography, dog-eared their copy, and staring at their Apple laptop, imagining Jobs’s signature scrawled on the inside. For this reader, the signature appears present despite its imperceptibility, conjuring the haunting allure of Jobs’s genius from the plastic, silicon, and titanium of the computer itself. The signatures of the rest of the design team, however, are never imagined, their names forgotten.

The circulation of Jobs’s genius allows him to appear as the “ghost in the machine,” not just in our imagined reader’s laptop, or even computers writ large, but also the economy itself, understood increasingly as the byproduct of an entrepreneurial elite’s unique inventive abilities. Dismantling economic inequality, then, means neither simply redistributing wealth, nor providing “more accurate” tales of technological change, as Mazzucato does. It also means

redistributing *talent* by exorcising the “ghost in the machine,” and directly confronting the metonymical power politics by which the source of our common life world appears to be the gifts of a talented few. In the next chapter, I illustrate the political importance of engaging economic inequality as a problem of “attribution” rather than “distribution,” by President Obama’s infamous “you didn’t build that” Roanoke address during the 2012 US presidential campaign.

## Chapter IV:

### **“You Didn’t Build That”: Infrastructure and the Individual**

On July 13, 2012, President Barack Obama, locked in a tight race against challenger Mitt Romney, took the stage at a fire station in Roanoke, Virginia. While his speech covered a wide range of topics, including home ownership, student debt, and American manufacturing, these other issues were relegated to the dustbin of history by a few striking paragraphs, delivered near the end of the speech. The president challenged the notion that the chasm forming between the 1% and 99% was the reflection of an enormous disparity in talent. Echoing a speech by Massachusetts Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren earlier that year, the president argued,

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you’ve got a business – you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen (Obama 2012, July 13).

Conservative commentators and politicians reacted immediately, building fundraising ads around the “you didn’t build that” sound bite (Spiering 2012, July 24). The Romney campaign circulated the meme at every opportunity, staging dozens of “We Did Build This,” rallies throughout the country (Turque 2012, July 25). After Romney named Paul Ryan as his running mate in August 2012, Ryan gave a series of campaign speeches with “You Didn’t Build That” emblazoned on signs behind him as he argued the president was calling for “more government” as the solution to poor job performance (Shepard 2012, August 22). By the start of the 2012 Republican National Convention, “you didn’t build that” had mutated from a sound bite used in attack ads into a key GOP indictment of President Obama’s economic leadership. The GOP’s circulation of the meme

reached its zenith during convention itself. The GOP devoted an entire day of the Republican Convention to the theme “We Built It,” playing on the president’s poor phrasing to characterize the party’s own economic philosophy (Stewart 2012, August 29). It is hardly an exaggeration to say, therefore, that the GOP’s circulation of “you didn’t build that” during the 2012 campaign provides powerful evidence not only of the GOP’s economic imaginary, but that of the US as a whole.

Given Obama’s successful re-election, it seems perfectly justified to question the insight the meme provides outside the Republican Party. If the president was victorious, then didn’t the “you didn’t build that” meme suffer defeat along with Romney? Rather than embracing the GOP’s characterization of the meme and defending the language he used in the Roanoke address, however, Obama’s rebuttal argued conservative media had taken the quote out of context. The president appeared in an ad in which he reassured his supporters that “of course,” he believed “Americans build their own businesses” (O’Brien 2012, July 24). The Obama campaign successfully defeated the GOP’s use of “you didn’t build that,” therefore, by *substantively agreeing* “the individual” is the author of innovation and job creation, but disagreeing instead about the role the government plays in amplifying that individual’s abilities.

The circulation of “you didn’t build that” reveals perhaps the central point of economic controversy between the GOP and the Democratic Party—the extent to which the government amplifies or diminishes the innovative and entrepreneurial capacities of “the individual.” Beneath agonism concerning the role of the government, however, lies a consensus regarding “the individual” as an ontological unit possessing certain capabilities. As Obama’s clarification of his own speech demonstrates, both sides largely agree it is this “individual,” and the exercise



of its particular capacities, which should serve as a yardstick for the effectiveness of state governance.

The case of “you didn’t build that” provides valuable insight into the politics of talent because the meme raises questions as to whether individuals have received their “just desserts.” In the introduction, I argued talent is a prism that operates metonymically upon the material artifacts of economic activity, attributing authorship for economic productivity and innovation to “talented individuals,” by figuring the individual’s talent as the origin from which economic activity springs. The circulation of Steve Jobs and “talented immigrants,” examined in chapters 2 and 3, both demonstrated the use of talent as a prism enables the perception of an individual as talented to cascade, producing an attribution bandwagon in which escalating levels of authorship are attributed to that individual. In this chapter, building upon the previous two, I question of the status of “the individual” itself, arguing that the presumption of “the individual” as an ontological unit both maintains and is maintained through the metonymical operation of talent. In turn, the presumed status of “the individual” reduces political questions about the limits and interaction of cognition, embodiment, and infrastructural networks to technical questions about “just desserts,” incentives, and risk calculation. The presumption of “the individual,” therefore, is not simply an effect of talent and its power politics, but also provides a surface on which to inscribe talent and the neoliberal imaginary itself.

In what follows, I first analyze the reaction to Obama’s Roanoke address, tracing the circulation of the “you didn’t build that” meme and its particular configuration of “the individual.” In the second section, I examine Harvard economics professor and Romney economic advisor N. Gregory Mankiw’s (2013) article “Defending the One Percent,” as an illustration that presuming “the individual” as an ontological unit has high stakes for economic

inequality. Finally, I suggest an alternative reading of “you didn’t build that,” utilizing Thomas Rickert’s (2013) “ambient rhetoric,” and Alva Noë’s (2009) “distributed cognition.” Rather than arguing distributed agency is a “preferable” ontology to “individualism,” this last section shows the politics involved in ontology itself while problematizing the neoliberal imaginary’s presentation of the market as a spontaneous mechanism for organizing society that avoids the fallibility of human perception.

### **Romney, Obama, and “Who Built It Anyway?”**

As the introduction noted, the Romney campaign immediately seized upon the “you didn’t build that” sound bite as a rallying cry to mobilize conservatives against Obama. Immediately after Obama’s Roanoke address, Romney gave a series of speeches criticizing the sound bite as emblematic of the president’s disdain towards entrepreneurs. In these addresses, the former Massachusetts governor deployed the quotation as part of a broader “ideological argument against progressives’ claim that their experts should guide the economy” (Munro 2012, July 17). He took particular umbrage with the notion that the government would, as he put it, “take credit for what individuals accomplish” (Romney as cited in Munro 2012, July 17). Romney’s response to Obama, therefore, treated Obama’s comment as representative of a deeply seated belief the government deserves credit for the success of individuals. In speeches on consecutive days, Romney attempted to illustrate the absurdity of attributing individual success to government policy by invoking Steve Jobs as a representative example of an entrepreneur. He contended, “To say what he said is to say that Steve Jobs didn’t build Apple Computer” (as cited in Montanaro 2012, July 18). Romney regarded the notion Steve Jobs did not deserve credit for the success of Apple as, “insulting to every entrepreneur, every innovator in America. And it’s wrong” (as cited in Montanaro 2012, July 18). For the Romney campaign, therefore, Obama’s

Roanoke address appeared to have such high stakes because, echoing the previous chapter, the president failed to attribute authorship for innovation to Steve Jobs in particular and talented entrepreneurs and innovators in general.

Critiques arguing Obama's speech insufficiently attributed credit to individuals were widespread, particularly among conservative commentators. They argued "you didn't build that," revealed Obama's belief that "everything is a co-production of the state" (Goldberg 2012, July 20). Critics concurred with Romney's assessment of the speech positing Obama had, "revealed a level of resentment toward the private sector that was startling" (Rubin 2012, July 24). Even less ideologically driven commentators willing to concede the meme was out of context argued, "Obama inadvertently helped feed his opponent's narrative that his real faith lies in the power of government, not private enterprise" (Marlantes 2012, July 18). As the circulation of the meme picked up, "the blogosphere and conservative talk shows picked up on the abbreviated version, making it sound as though the president was telling business owners they weren't responsible for their businesses, or entitled to the fruits of their labor" (Elving 2012, August 31). Romney spoke in the same voice as much of the conservative media, therefore, when he argued,

This is an ideology which says, hey, we're all the same here. We ought to take from all and give to one another. And that achievement, individual initiative and risk-taking and success are not to be rewarded as they were in the past. It's a very strange and in some respects, foreign to the American experience type of philosophy. We have always been a nation that has celebrated success of various kinds (Romney as cited in Navarro 2012, July 23).

The above comments demonstrate the centrality of "attribution" to the conservative critique of Obama. For Romney, as well as conservative commentators, "individuals" are the source of innovation and economic productivity, and as a result they deserve the fruits of their labor.

The conservative attack pitted just desserts and attribution of authorship to individuals against the coercive seizure both of wealth and credit for success by the government. Romney exemplified this tendency, arguing,

This is what propels our economy. When an American succeeds, when she wins a promotion, when he creates a business, it is that individual, that American that has earned it, that has built it. Government does not build our businesses, the American people do. The American people also build the government. We pay for it with our taxes. We choose who will lead us with our votes (Romney 2012, August 14).

As the above address demonstrates, Romney treats attribution as a choice between two possible options: individuals and the government. The “you didn’t build that” meme is problematic, therefore, because it fails to afford individuals their due recognition as authors of economic innovation. In turn, insufficient individual credit is problematic both because it involves a resentful attitude towards talented and entrepreneurial individuals, and because it fails to recognize society as a “field of individuals.” Even questioning whether the rewards, promotions, and income distributed to individuals are their just desserts is tantamount to collectivist seizure of property. For Romney, therefore, avoiding government seizure of authorship requires entirely depoliticizing attribution by collapsing the distinction between attribution and distribution.

The introduction noted Obama’s immediate response to conservative circulation of the “you didn’t build that” meme. Rather than contesting the conservative model of attribution outright, Obama argued the sound bite was out of context. Obama spokeswoman Lis Smith contended,

As President Obama said the other day, those who start businesses succeed because of their individual initiative – their drive, hard work, and creativity. But there are critical

actions we must take to support businesses and encourage new ones – that means we need the best infrastructure, a good education system, and affordable, domestic sources of clean energy. Those are investments we make not as individuals, but as Americans, and our nation benefits from them (Lis Smith as cited in Murray 2012, July 17).

Liberal commentator Jonathan Chait (2012, July 18) concurred, arguing Obama meant to say, “the entrepreneur didn’t build the entire physical and social infrastructure that allowed his [sic] business to flourish, not that he didn’t build the business itself.” Instead, he argued Obama’s position is merely a criticism of the *extent* to which individuals are responsible for their success. As he puts it, “you didn’t build that” is a criticism of “the currently in vogue right-wing view that attributes all the economic success of the rich to their own genius and hard work” (Chait 2012, July 18). Major media outlet fact checkers largely agreed the Romney campaign and its supporters were taking the quote out of context. Glen Kessler (2012, July 23) offers a representative example, positing, “Romney, however, descends into silly season when he extrapolates Obama’s quote and says that means Obama believes Steve Jobs did not build Apple Computers.” Instead, he argues,

Here’s what Obama said when Jobs passed away earlier this year: “By building one of the planet’s most successful companies from his garage, he exemplified the spirit of American ingenuity. By making computers personal and putting the Internet in our pockets, he made the information revolution not only accessible, but intuitive and fun.”

That sounds like Obama believes that Jobs really did build his company. He did not mention the roads to Cupertino (Kessler 2012, July 23).

Clive Crook (2012, July 22), a former editor at The Economist, concurred, labeling those who believe, “Obama thinks Steve Jobs didn’t build Apple,” as “daft.” In response to the conservative

characterization of “you didn’t build that,” therefore, the Obama campaign and liberal commentators primarily argued this characterization intentionally removed the president’s speech from context.

The description these interlocutors offered of the conservative line of argument reveals considerable overlap between the two perspectives. Their characterization of the Romney campaign as having, “gone off the deep end,” (Lis Smith as cited in Murray 2012, July 17) and “descending into silly season” (Kessler 2012, July 23) illustrated the extent to which “the individual” operates as bedrock of political common sense. Crook offers a particularly telling reading, positing,

I think it's pretty clear that when Obama said "You didn't build that" he had in mind either the "roads and bridges" of the previous sentence, or else "this unbelievable American system" in the sentence before. Even if you don't find this as obvious as I do, it's absurd to attribute to him the view that the people who build a business deserve no more credit for it than society at large--the simple-minded reading of "you didn't build that". You don't need to listen to the adjoining sentences or the rest of the speech. Just ask yourself whether Obama is even sane, and that interpretation is impossible. It's not what he meant, and it's not what he thinks (Crook 2012, July 22).

Democrats, therefore, not only largely agreed with conservatives that individuals deserve the authorship attributed to them for economic success; they regarded the belief as so fundamental that the Romney campaign’s attack appeared outrageous. Moreover, as the particular umbrage at conservative attacks involving Steve Jobs shows, both sides regard those circulated as “talented individuals” as particularly deserving of the authorship they are attributed.

Instead, the major terms of engagement over the “you didn’t build that,” meme concerned the government’s ability to amplify the already-existing creativity and ingenuity possessed by individuals. While Romney and his supporters argued the notion the government played a role in the success of individuals was tantamount to coercion, Obama campaign backers suggested the state provides key infrastructure that enables individual talent. Alex Koppelman invokes Steve Jobs yet again to summarize Obama’s perspective, arguing Jobs,

may have started Apple in his parents’ garage, but first he attended a public high school, where he met the person who introduced him to eventual Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak. And even if they never took a dime of government funding to do so, the computers they built together owed a great deal to—and indeed, might never have been possible without—government research, government scientists, and government money (Koppelman 2012, July 18).

Crook offers a more succinct synthesis, positing, “Obama’s main, and sometimes I think only, theme in this campaign is that the rich aren’t paying their fair share” (Crook 2012, July 22). Attribution of authorship to talented individuals, therefore, is an assumption maintained both by the Romney and Obama campaigns and their supporters, as well as other popular media commentators. Indeed, despite Romney’s initial reading of the speech, talent, attribution, and authorship appeared not to be regarded as political in the first place. Rather, the major point of contention in the circulation of the “you didn’t build that,” meme concerned the obligation of the richest Americans to pay for the maintenance of basic infrastructure and services such as roads, public schools, and firefighters.

The Obama campaign and its supporters forwarded this position not as a claim on individual authorship, but instead as a moral obligation on the part of the rich to use their

disproportionate success to maintain market access and opportunity. The restriction of political debate over attribution, authorship, and talent performed by both sides is made possible by reducing attribution to a binary choice between assigning credit to the government and the individual. This binary neglects important questions about the difficulties involved in separating the contributions of one individual from another by simply accepting the markets distribution of rewards as an accurate reflection of ability. In the next section, I demonstrate that presumption of “the individual” as an ontological unit carries significant implications for economic inequality, turning to N. Gregory Mankiw’s (2013) article “Defending the One Percent” as a particular site at which these consequences are made clear.

### **Mankiw and “Just Desserts”**

In the aftermath of the 2012 election, N. Gregory Mankiw, a Harvard professor of economics, former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors for President George W. Bush, and economic advisor to the Romney campaign, published “Defending the One Percent.” Mankiw’s essay is noteworthy because unlike many other conservative scholars, he does not refute the claim that income inequality has been accelerating. Instead, he argues that escalating inequality reflects a real and growing productivity gap between individuals. In the article, he explicitly responds to President Obama’s Roanoke speech, arguing against redistribution of wealth to resolve relative inequality. Given his prominent role as an economic counselor to the Romney campaign and his explicit engagement with Obama’s “you didn’t build that” sound bite, the article can be reasonably taken as an extended meditation on the debate the meme’s circulation initiated.

The article itself begins with a thought experiment foregrounding similar assumptions about “the individual” as those found in the previous section. Mankiw asks his audience to,



Imagine a society with perfect economic equality. Perhaps out of sheer coincidence, the supply and demand for different types of labor happen to produce an equilibrium in which everyone earns exactly the same income. As a result, no one worries about the gap between the rich and poor, and no one debates to what extent public policy should make income redistribution a priority. Because people earn the value of their marginal product, everyone is fully incentivized to provide the efficient amount of effort. The government is still needed to provide public goods, such as national defense, but those are financed with a lump-sum tax. There is no need for taxes that would distort incentives, such as an income tax, because they would be strictly worse for everyone. The society enjoys not only perfect equality but also perfect efficiency. (p. 1).

This pseudo-“state of nature” is “disturbed by an entrepreneur with an idea for a new product. Think of the entrepreneur as Steve Jobs as he develops the iPod” (p. 1). The result of this act of “disruptive entrepreneurship” is that,

When the entrepreneur’s product is introduced, everyone in society wants to buy it. They each part with, say, \$100. The transaction is a voluntary exchange, so it must make both the buyer and the seller better off. But because there are many buyers and only one seller, the distribution of economic well-being is now vastly unequal. The new product makes the entrepreneur much richer than everyone else (p. 1).

This thought experiment is of tremendous importance for the rest of the argument Mankiw advances. As he puts it, “this thought experiment captures, in an extreme and stylized way, what has happened to US society over the past several decades” (p. 2).

Mankiw is quick to agree that if increasing economic inequality is the byproduct of rent seeking, the manipulation of markets to the advantage of government officials and their political

allies, then it is problematic. Citing economists Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee, however, he argues existing inequality is driven by digital technologies that allow, “entrepreneurs, CEOs, entertainment stars, and financial executives” the opportunity to “leverage their talents across global markets and capture reward that would have been unimaginable in earlier times” (p. 5). He does, however, concede rent seeking may be an explanation for the massive compensation packages of financial executives. This is problematic because,

A well-functioning economy needs the correct allocation of talent. The last thing we need is for the next Steve Jobs to forgo Silicon Valley in order to join the high-frequency traders on Wall Street. That is, we shouldn’t be concerned about the next Steve Jobs striking it rich, but we want to make sure he strikes it rich in a socially productive way (p. 6).

Mankiw analyzes Obama’s Roanoke address through the lens of these premises. He argues the “you didn’t build that” meme indexes Obama’s belief that the rich “achieved their wealth in large measure because of the goods and services the government provides and therefore have a responsibility to finance those goods and services” (p. 31). He rebuts this view by arguing the rich already pay much higher taxes than everyone else, indicating that the wealthy *already* assume a greater degree of social responsibility. Moreover, he argues Obama’s argument does not justify redistribution of wealth since the purpose of these taxes is not resolving collective action problems, as is the case for roads, legal institutions, and the education system, but instead is a “transfer payment” from the wealthy to the less wealthy (p. 31).

Instead, he argues wealth should be distributed on the basis of “just deserts.” He describes this position as the belief that,

people should receive compensation congruent with their contributions. If the economy were described by a classical competitive equilibrium without any externalities or public goods, then every individual would earn the value of his or her own marginal product, and there would be no need for government to alter the resulting income distribution. The role of government arises as the economy departs from this classical benchmark.

Pigovian taxes and subsidies are necessary to correct externalities, and progressive income taxes can be justified to finance public goods based on the benefits principle.

Transfer payments to the poor have a role as well, because fighting poverty can be viewed as a public good (p. 32-33).

For Mankiw, therefore, economic inequality is justifiable so long as it is the byproduct of the market's determination an individual has been disproportionately productive. Redistribution of income, however, is unjustified both for ethical and efficiency reasons. Ethically, redistribution is problematic because it requires confiscation and transfer of wealth from one individual to another, violating the property rights of wealthy individuals. Redistribution is inefficient because it disincentives both talented and low-skilled individuals from maximizing their effort and improving their human capital.

As the previous section demonstrated, Mankiw's assumptions hardly exist at the fringes of the public's economic imaginary. Indeed, critics of the conservative interpretation of "you didn't build that," vigorously agreed that individuals deserve the fruits of their labor. This belief was so strongly held that the conservative claim Obama was calling it into question appeared just cause for outrage or laughter. Obama's argument that, "Right now in one of those classrooms, there's a student wrestling with how to turn their big idea, their Intel or Instagram, into a big business," (Obama 2013, January 29) cited in the second chapter, even echoes Mankiw's thought

experiment by presuming innovations are the byproduct of moments of individual inspiration. Instead, the major points of disagreement between Mankiw and Obama are empirical questions concerning whether or not inequality is the byproduct of the political influence of the wealthy, and the extent to which existing levels of taxation are sufficient to provide the basic services necessary for entrepreneurship and individual economic opportunity.

These assumptions, however, require a prior investment in both a neoliberal imaginary and “the individual” as a basic ontological unit. As with the commentators cited in the previous section, Mankiw largely ignores the question of *attribution*, instead engaging economic inequality as a problem of *distribution*. Mankiw’s thought experiment enables him to emphasize distribution because he himself attributes the iPod to Steve Jobs. Attribution disappears not because it is not important, therefore, but because according to the premise of the thought experiment *it has already occurred*. Mankiw’s entire essay, therefore, hinges upon the phrase “an entrepreneur with an idea for a new product,” because it traces the source of ideas to moments of inspiration arising spontaneously from within individuals. As the previous chapter illustrated, Steve Jobs functions as a particularly effective representative case since his circulation as a genius possessing ineffable qualities is highly salient within US public culture. By presupposing the individual as an ontological unit in which cognition and inspiration are enclosed, Mankiw’s argument, itself a fair approximation for the fault lines defining the US economic imaginary, allows economic inequality to appear as a technical problem instead of an ethical crisis. In the next section, I offer an alternative reading of Obama’s “you didn’t build that,” speech that politicizes “the individual” itself as an ontological unit

## **Infrastructure & Distributed Cognition**

As the previous section demonstrated, both Mankiw and Obama present economic inequality as a problem of the distribution of wealth. Thus, the debate largely hinges upon the amount that can be justifiably “transferred” from the richest Americans to those with less wealth. The circulation of “you didn’t build that,” during the 2012 election reduced the question of attribution to a simple decision between “individuals” or “the state” as the source of economic productivity and innovation. Supporters of both campaigns agreed attributing the fruits of individual talent to the state is a dangerously authoritarian and collectivist move. Instead, the debate largely turned the extent to which the state is capable of amplifying pre-existing individual talent. While Obama argued wealthy individuals have an obligation to finance the basic infrastructural services necessary to support economic opportunity, the Romney campaign took the view that the wealthy already contribute their due, while arguing many of the services government provides could be better delivered by the market. In so doing, economic inequality appeared as a problem of limited economic opportunity caused by market failure and collective action problems.

As the previous chapter argued in the context of Steve Jobs, however, attribution is not simply a problem of choosing between “individuals” or “the state.” This binary relies on the assumption that market valuations of labor accurately index the actual contribution of individuals, leaving the state as the only remaining entity capable of laying claim to a share of the rewards. The case of Steve Jobs, however, illustrates that market valuation depends upon taking the power politics of attribution and authorship at face value and discharging the complex interpretive problems involved in determining authorship for economic production. Rather than the neoliberal imaginary and the market enabling individual responsibility and agency, therefore,

“talent” and its corresponding notion of authorship arising from “the individual” have legitimated the neoliberal imaginary’s notion of political subjects as self-interested, utility maximizing individuals. Reducing attribution to a choice between “individuals” or “the state” requires the presupposition that the population is a field of individuals, and that the boundaries between those individuals are straightforward. The recognition of economic inequality as a problem of *attribution of talent*, therefore, requires problematizing “the individual” itself, as the basic ontological unit legitimizing the neoliberal imaginary. This leaves the problem, however, of specifying the possible alternatives to an ontology grounded in “the individual.” In the remainder of this section, I sketch an initial response to this question, re-reading Obama’s Roanoke address in light of work on “distributed cognition,” and “ambience.”

A key term running throughout both Obama’s speech in Roanoke and Mankiw’s reading of the speech is “infrastructure.” Obama describes as collective achievements the building of the “Golden Gate Bridge and the Hoover Dam,” as well as “the Internet” (Obama 2012, July 13). He praises Roanoke as a “railroad hub,” while advocating that the US should, “rebuild our roads and our bridges and our rail systems, and let’s build wireless networks into rural communities so everybody can tap into world markets” (Obama 2012, July 13). Most importantly, infrastructure plays an exceptionally prominent role in the “you didn’t build that,” meme, since the president later clarified he meant individuals didn’t build “roads and bridges” (Obama 2012, July 13). Infrastructure is such a pronounced theme that Mankiw actually categorizes Obama’s speech as a defense of public infrastructure finance, describing it as an example of the argument that, “the rich benefit from the physical, legal, and social infrastructure that government provides and, therefore, should contribute to supporting it” (p. 19). In an exceptionally telling passage, Mankiw attempts to refute this position, arguing,

This line of argument raises the empirical question of how large the benefit of government infrastructure is. The average value is surely very high, as lawless anarchy would leave the rich (as well as most everyone else) much worse off. But like other inputs into the production process, government infrastructure should be valued at the margin, where the valuation is harder to discern. As I pointed out earlier, the average person in the top 1 percent pays more than a quarter of income in federal taxes, and about a third if state and local taxes are included. Why isn't that enough to compensate for the value of government infrastructure? (p. 19).

Mankiw never answers the question posed at the end of this passage. Instead, the question operates as an appeal for his audience to "be reasonable," about the tax obligations of the wealthy. As he argues in conclusion, "if the incomes of the top 1 percent were much greater than their economic contributions," than higher taxation might be justified, but "there is no compelling reason to believe" that this is the case (p. 19).

The difficulty of assessing the value of infrastructure hints at a deeper, much more fundamental problem: separating "the individual" from the "infrastructural environs" in which they are located. As Thomas Rickert (2013) argues in the context of authorship,

The "writer" writing cannot be understood as a discrete, individualized entity bound by skin and self-image, wielding external and thoughts (which, by being external, can "alienate" us), for in writing we entwine ourselves with the accouterment of writing—pen, paper, keyboard, typewriter, computer, books, ideas, sounds, furniture, food, beverage, interruption, serendipity, the things dotting the local environment and the environment itself, the larger infrastructure, other people, even our own bodies—and lose ourselves in immersion. Ideas emerge in the complexity of interaction beyond our

individual control, since the ambient situation worlds us. We contribute, of course, but as a catalyst and site of disclosure, not as sole producer and controller (p. 119).

Rickert's explanation of writing as an activity entangled with "ambience" turns the problem of identifying the marginal value of infrastructure as an input on its head. Even the notion that infrastructure has a "marginal value," first requires the separation of the contributions of "the individual" from the "infrastructure" itself. Yet as Rickert demonstrates above, the notion of the "individual author," involves a number of questionable assumptions regarding cognition and agency.

In a similar vein, Alva Noë (2009) calls into question this easy separation of individual cognition from infrastructural environs, arguing, "Consciousness isn't something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us" (p. 24). Noë uses the metaphor of a hiking trail to illustrate this notion of "distributed cognition" which has profound implications for the notion that innovation is the byproduct of "talented individuals" and their "moments of inspiration." He argues,

It is almost impossible to beat a path through thickets and bramble; if we want to go someplace and do something, we have to stick to the path. And so it is with our intellectual lives. The paths we lay down are paved with the skills needed to move forward...Scholars master what has been written and said already so that they know what would even count as original. Artists, writers, and filmmakers are no less constrained by what has gone before, which marks the spot where there is still work to be done in this genre or that medium. Radical novelty is almost impossible, and if we were to stumble upon it, it would take unusual strength and power to see anything of value in it (p. 124).



Distributed cognition demonstrates the political stakes involved in attributing authorship for innovation to talent. While the controversy surrounding “you didn’t build that,” reduced attribution to a choice between individuals and the government, both Noë and Rickert show the difficulty in separating out the boundary of individuals at all. Moreover, even if individuals can be separated, isolating the particular uniqueness of their contribution as a byproduct of “talent,” is almost impossible because the exercise of skills and abilities occurs in historically situated conditions that already guide the operation of those skills.

The problem of separating individuals and infrastructure is not simply an abstract ontological riddle. The political stakes of “the individual,” are revealed in the thought experiment Mankiw presents at the beginning of his article. In his narrative, Steve Jobs is already the author of the iPod, itself a byproduct of a “moment of inspiration,” in which the idea for the innovation, as the cliché goes, appears to “simply come to him.” For Rickert, however, Mankiw’s imagined case is an example of the flaws of allowing the “salient” to appear to be all there is. As he writes,

Attention attends to the salient, but the bringing forth of salience is itself a complex activity that has ambient dimensions. This poses a problem, as I will show, when the salient is taken for all that there is or all that matters. It poses a problem precisely because it excludes from discussion how the ambient dimensions of a rhetorical situation constitute the ways things emerge and show up for us in the first place (p. xi).

The recourse continually made to Steve Jobs in both the circulation of “you didn’t build that,” and Mankiw’s article is telling. In the previous chapter, I argued Steve Jobs is such a salient figure, easily separated from his infrastructural environs, because of the presumption that he is a genius. In turn, this presumption allows him to appear to possess a transcendent aesthetic

sensibility, depoliticizing the problem of whether the signs of Jobs's genius are an effect of power politics or the manifestations of an inaccessible "spectral faculty," capable of grasping objects in themselves without mediation. This notion of "taste" itself is politically and historically sedimented, emerging from within the Enlightenment rhetorical tradition. This notion of "taste," as Martha Woodensee noted in the introduction, emerged simultaneously with the notion of "the author" as the source of inspiration from which works of writing emerge. The emergence of this notion of authorship was itself driven by writers's desire to make a living through their writing, but their inability to do so because of a lack of intellectual property and copyright protections. Mankiw's injunction to, "Think of the entrepreneur as Steve Jobs as he develops the iPod," develops a general model of "the entrepreneurial individual," by playing upon the pre-existing salience of Steve Jobs to the exclusion of the many ambient dimensions underpinning this particular figure and his availability within public discourse.

Rather than reading Obama's Roanoke address as an argument about government's ability to amplify individual talent, Rickert's notion of "ambience" suggests "you didn't build that," might be read as indexing the infrastructural environs in which "individuals" are located. These infrastructural environs trouble claims that the saliency of particular individuals is the byproduct of their "talent," because even determining they have talent in the first place requires a clear separation of the individual from their environment. Indeed, even innovations themselves draw upon pre-existing knowledge, research, and techniques, which Noë terms a "path," rendering their novelty and the weight of their contribution problematic. In this reading, "you didn't build that," highlights the agency exerted by ambient, infrastructural conditions themselves, including the other humans with whom a particular individual works and lives.

Obama's use of the indefinite pronoun "somebody," as in "Somebody else made that happen," is revealing because it gives grammatical form to the difficulty of separating individual from infrastructure and attributing authorship. Read in this light, "Somebody else made that happen," is not a claim that the government is responsible for particular businesses. Instead, the indefinite quality of "somebody" opens up attribution and the relationship between "the individual" and "infrastructure," as political problems incapable of being resolved by appeals to "talent" and "genius."

While ontology is a site for politics, however, politics is not reducible to it. In re-reading Obama's Roanoke address, I am not suggesting cognition is "actually" distributed or that infrastructure is "really" the source of authorship. My aim, in fact, is precisely the opposite: illustrating that "the talented individual" is not an ontological unit that can eliminate political problems of attribution. In the process, problematizing attribution as a political problem illustrates the power relations underlying market valuation within a neoliberal imaginary, and the power politics that appeals to talent intend to avoid through metonymy. Far from simply representing "spontaneous governance," therefore, "you didn't build that," reveals the neoliberal imaginary's reliance on precisely the practices of human perception it claims to avoid.

## **Chapter V:**

### **Conclusion—Beyond the Neoliberal Imaginary**

In this thesis, I have questioned the function discourses of “talent” play in economic governance in general and economic inequality in particular. To do so, I studied the discourse of US pro-immigration advocates, the circulation of Steve Jobs within popular media, and public responses to Obama’s 2012 Roanoke campaign address. I have argued “talent” discourse operates rhetorically, enabling the attribution of authorship for economic innovation to a small, select few, justifying escalating economic inequality as the market’s determination of individual contribution and ability. In response, I have contended attribution is an ontological problem, concerning not just authorship of economic innovations, but agency itself in the relationship between individual and infrastructural environs. I have posited engaging this relationship as a political problem allows inequality to appear as an ethical crisis, rather than a technical problem of market composition and efficient resource distribution.

Engaging the discourse of US pro-immigration advocates, I demonstrated the key role talent plays as a justification for increased US visa distribution. By arguing talented immigrants are the source of economic innovation, backers of expanded US immigration reform justified the inclusion of these immigrants against the presumption that immigrants are a drain on the US economy. In the process, they drew upon a neoliberal economic imaginary in which states are embedded in conditions of “international competitiveness,” and must manage themselves as firms seeking to attract capital and labor. Advocates argued talent is a particularly scarce resource in this global competition, requiring the US immigration system to be calibrated to attract talented immigrants and secure victory in the “global war for talent.” In order to justify the economic importance of these immigrants, President Obama and other campaigners for

expanded US immigration relied on talent's metonymical function to attribute authorship for innovations to talented individuals. I argued the implication of the global war for talent is an intensification of global economic inequality as nation-states compete with one another to offer preferential terms to these immigrants. This chapter illustrated the function talent plays in organizing global governance as neoliberal governmentality.

In the next chapter, I analyzed the circulation of Steve Jobs as a man of genius in popular media, especially Walter Isaacson's official biography *Steve Jobs*. These media took Jobs's status as genius as a given, and moved to specify the particular quality of his genius. They described Jobs as a "man of delicate taste," and attributed him authorship for Apple's unique aesthetic, which they regarded as the source of the company's productivity and success. In mobilizing "delicate taste," these accounts drew upon the notion of "taste" embedded in the rhetorical tradition of the Enlightenment, particularly the work of David Hume and Hugh Blair. These thinkers regarded those with delicate taste as geniuses possessing a transcendental sensibility capable of entirely closing the gap between objects and sentiment, and apprehending works of art as unmediated aesthetic objects. Enlightenment rhetorical theorists argued the problem of identifying those possessing delicate taste could be resolved by appreciating great works from within the Western, imperial canon. This introduced an interpretive dilemma, since the metonymical operation of talent and genius enables the "effects," or material products, of genius to simultaneously serve as evidence of genius *ex post facto*. During the Enlightenment, however, metonymy appeared to be a reliable mechanism for identifying genius because these thinkers, especially Hugh Blair, deployed racialized and colonial relations of power to exclude vast sectors of the global population from qualifying as persons of delicate taste. In the context of Steve Jobs, the assumption he was a genius rendered nearly invisible the power politics by

which he struggled to attribute authorship for Apple's success to himself. As a result, Jobs became a representative example for the wealthiest Americans, enabling inequality to appear to be the byproduct of genius, while simultaneously allowing the circulation of Jobs to cascade. I argued Jobs illustrates the mechanism by which talent and genius depoliticize attribution of authorship, legitimating and naturalizing distribution of income as a byproduct of the spontaneous order of market valuation.

The final case study examined President Obama's 2012 Roanoke campaign address, in which he uttered the unfortunate "you didn't build that," sound bite. The circulation of this sound bite demonstrated the role "the individual" as an ontological unit plays in attributing authorship for economic innovation and determining labor contribution. Conservatives interpreted the comment as evidence Obama attributed business success to the government rather than entrepreneurs. The president's supporters responded that the claim he believed the government should receive credit for individual economic achievements was ludicrous, and argued the government instead supplied basic services necessary to amplify and enhance the abilities of talented individuals. N. Gregory Mankiw's article, "Defending the One Percent," offered an extended engagement with the problems of economic inequality and attribution raised by Obama's Roanoke address. Mankiw argued economic inequality was justified because the richest Americans gained their wealth through disproportionate productivity and because greater taxes on the wealthy were primarily confiscatory transfer payments rather than investments in public services like infrastructure. In order to make these arguments, Mankiw relied on a thought experiment describing a "moment of inspiration," in which Steve Jobs invented the iPod. This thought experiment attempted to render attribution of authorship simply self-evident recognition of individual talent. In response, I offered an alternative reading of Obama's address through the

lens of “ambience” and “distributed cognition,” arguing that the separation of “the individual” from the infrastructural environment in which they are located requires a prior, political act of interpretation that Mankiw, Obama, and other interpreters of “you didn’t build that,” elide. I concluded that recognizing the individual itself as a contested political category recovers the political dimension of attribution and authorship, and reveals economic inequality as an ethical, rather than a technical problem.

This thesis has significant implications for economic policy, particularly with respect to issues of inequality. Against the dominant understanding of economic inequality as an issue of the *redistribution* of wealth, I argue a fundamental, prior issue is the *retribution of talent*. Framed as a problem of redistribution, economic inequality appears to require the transfer of wealth from productive individuals making disproportionately large economic contributions, to less productive individuals contributing substantially less. Even those that allege the wealthy have distorted markets to their advantage by leveraging their considerable political influence, such as Joseph Stiglitz, retain a deeper underlying belief in an “undistorted market,” in which market valuation is able to properly assess the contributions of individuals. They remain equally susceptible, therefore, to talent’s metonymical function, allowing the circulation of an individual as talented to render their contributions both everywhere and nowhere.

If economic inequality is understood as a problem of attribution of talent, however, the question of individual contribution becomes more immediately political. Attempts to correct inequality appear, therefore, not as transfer payments from the very productive to the less productive, but instead as interventions targeted at the market’s tendency to allow talent to cascade and a single individual to receive authorship. Even the problem of separating individuals from the infrastructural environments in which they are embedded appears to be an interpretive

problem with significant political stakes. Engaging economic inequality as an attribution problem, therefore, exposes the politics lurking behind the neoliberal imaginary's claims that the market operates at realm above the fallibility of human judgment, and that economic inequality simply reflects a deeper inequality in the contributions made by workers to society.



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